

THERE'S NO WAY
A SIDE
CHARACTER LIKE ME
COULD BE
POPULAR,
RIGHT?

Author
Sekaiichi

Illustrator
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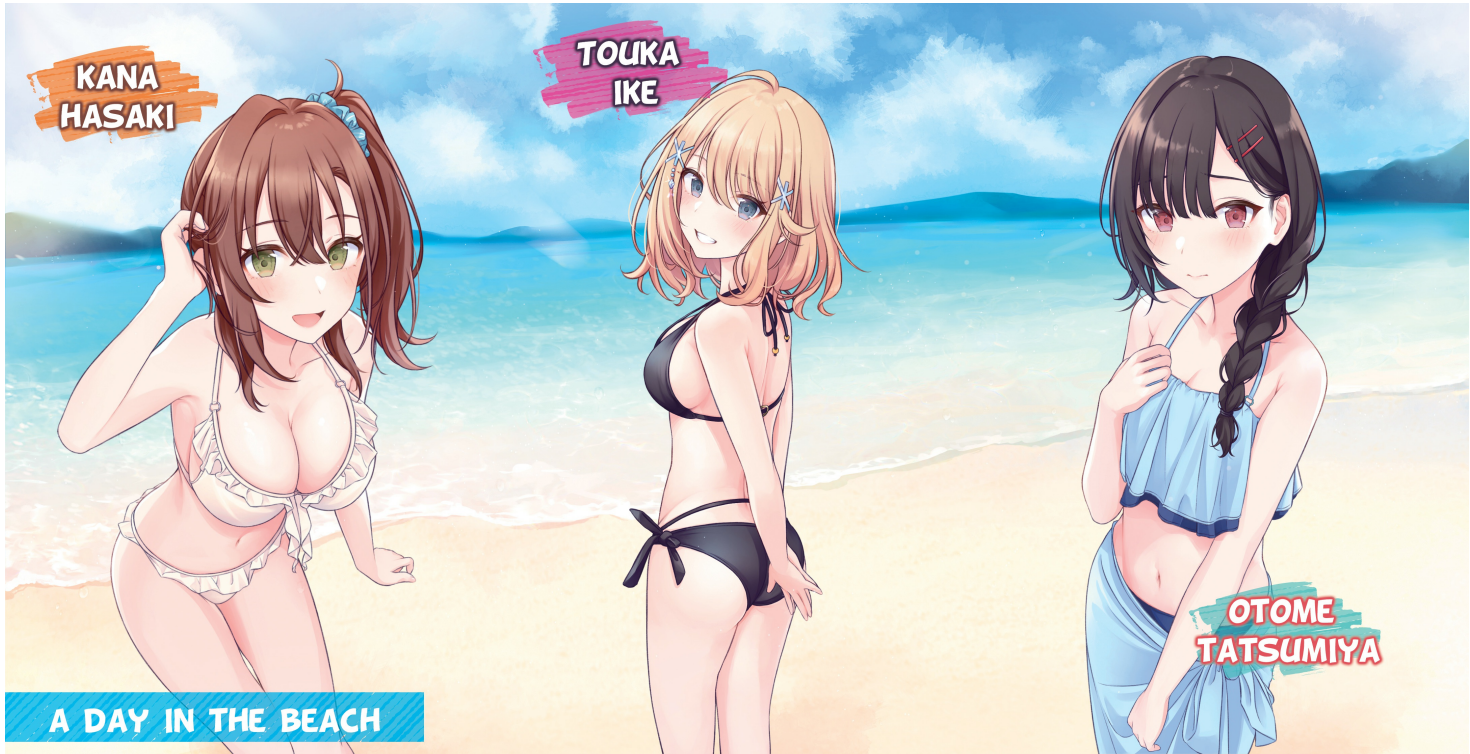
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An anime-style illustration of a young woman with long black hair and purple eyes. She is wearing a dark blue kimono with a pattern of red and orange autumn leaves and a small orange fish. She has a pink flower in her hair. She is holding a large red round candy on a stick in her mouth. The background is a warm, out-of-focus scene with red and orange tones, suggesting a festival or autumn setting. In the top left corner, her name 'MAKIRI CHIAKI' is written in white on a blue brushstroke. At the bottom, a quote is written in green with a black outline.

**MAKIRI
CHIAKI**

**"I'M GLAD WE COULD ENJOY
THIS TOGETHER."**



A DAY IN THE BEACH



"THEY'RE BEAUTIFUL"

"YES THEY ARE. WHICH REMINDS ME..."

"WHAT IS IT, SENPAI?"

"I FORGOT TO MENTION HOW YOUR YUKATA
LOOKS BEAUTIFUL ON YOU. WAY BETTER THAN
WHAT I IMAGINED."

FIREWORKS

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Chapter One

There's No Way a Side Character Like Me Can Have an Enjoyable Summer Vacation, Right?

All of my summer vacations up until now haven't been the best. I remember when I still spent them with friends, back when I was just a kid.

The time I spent with that boy... or well, "that girl" is what I should say, were probably some of my best memories, back when I thought summer vacations were just extended purgatory for me. In those times, I thought that I wouldn't be able to spend better summers than the ones I spent with Natsuo. However, I must say that this summer has been exceeding my expectations thus far, and it's all thanks to the people I've met this year.

Starting from the person I've been pretending to date, but at the same time someone who I also have developed an incredible sense of trust, Touka Ike.

Then comes the person who actually was my childhood friend Natsuo, and then revealed the truth that they'd been a girl this entire time. Her name is Kana Hasaki.

Then we have my classmate Yoshito Asakura, always on the lookout for his one true love, and Kai Rekka, someone who has taken quite a liking to me for some reason.

And then there's my best friend, Haruma Ike. He's the school's student council prez, and he's pretty much the walking definition of perfect. The vice president Otome Tatsumiya doesn't lag far behind him, and there's also Suzuki and Tanaka-senpai. I was able to spend a lot of time with them on a special student council trip I was invited to, despite not being part of said council. All of these people have made my summer vacations much more enjoyable, and they wouldn't be the same without them.

I also can't leave out the person who pretty much saved me from becoming a criminal, or worse, Chiaki Makiri, one of my teachers. I've come to know

recently that under that icy exterior, Makiri-sensei is actually a very gentle and caring person, as well as someone who I find quite attractive.

I wish I could repay her for all the favors she's given me. I would jump at the chance, believe me.

So yeah, thanks to all of these people, I've been able to have fun on my summer vacations, just like my childhood memories of playing with Natsuo. I feel happy once more.

Chapter Two

Solo Camping

After an incident involving tricking Makiri-sensei's dad into thinking that we were dating, I had a ton of free time on my hands. I decided to use that time to finish my summer homework, and by the middle of vacation I completely finished it, which meant that I had too much free time once again.

"Man, I'm bored..."

All I'm doing right now is reading manga in my room on my phone as I try to survive the scorching heat by cranking the AC up as high as possible.

I find myself in a little bit of a predicament. I'd like to invite my friends over, but I have a lot of social anxiety. I don't even know how or what I should say to invite them, so I sit here hoping someone can invite me instead to save me the trouble.

Then again, I guess beggars can't be choosers. Compared to other summers, this one has been the most eventful so far. I remember going to a nearby pond a couple of times last summer to hang out alone, and that was considered a highlight. And don't even get me started on my summer vacations when I was in middle school.

So yeah, I'm used to doing almost nothing whatsoever, which is the reason why I'm not overly worried about doing anything in particular for days on end.

For the time being, I think I'll just keep reading manga for a while, and maybe when the sun goes down I'll go for a jog outside and leave it at that... hm? Someone's knocking on my door.

I stand up and open the door to my room, finding my pops standing behind it. Weird. He never comes to my room like this.

"You need something?"

"Well, kind of..." he manages to faintly whisper in return, followed by "Looks like you've got a lot of free time right now."

“I guess I do. What about you, though? Aren’t you supposed to be working? Today’s a weekday, isn’t it?”

I didn’t notice what day it was today, but I should’ve known what day it is since all of my favorite manga chapters release on the same day.

Considering my father has always been kind of a hardass about his job, it’s weird to see him at home before it gets really late at night, especially on a weekday.

“I’ve decided to take my summer vacation now,” he answers with a straight face.

“Huh, okay.”

I forgot that he can choose an amount of days throughout the year to take a vacation. Most people who work tend to take them around now. That makes sense.

“...How are your studies going, by the way? I assume you’ve been given summer homework to do?” he asks me, with a serious look on his face.

I suppose he came here to tell me that I should prioritize finishing my homework instead of doing nothing, like I am right now. It’s his way of trying to act like a proper parent. He’s been doing this a lot lately. Ever since Makiri-sensei came here to have that talk with him, he’s been trying harder to approach me and act more like a father, which I appreciate.

“I’ve already finished the homework I was given. When I feel up for it, I’m also preparing for some of the subjects we’ll be tackling next year.”

“Mhm,” he nods in response. But instead of answering with a smile, he gives me a nasty glare and then...

“You can’t stay in your room studying all day!”

“Wait, what? Then what did you come here for? Weren’t you going to tell me to study harder?” I answer, surprised. I’m honestly kind of shocked that he didn’t come here to bug me about that.

“Yuuji, put on some comfortable clothing, and call for me once you’re dressed. You’re gonna learn some valuable life lessons today,” he says, and

then promptly leaves.

I think the most important thing in life is to be able to communicate with other people correctly, but my father never taught me how to talk like a normal person, so I'm not sure what he wants to teach me here.

Anyways, dilly-dallying won't help me. I just have to do what he says and see where it takes me.



It's been an hour since I got into the car with my pops. I asked him where we were going, but he's been quiet as a rock ever since we started the trip. At some point I gave up, and instead of trying to ask him more questions, I simply resigned myself to looking out the window and checking the scenery around me.

At first I see the town where we live, which is a place I'm used to seeing, but soon enough we enter a more rural area, and eventually we arrive at a mountain road.

"Here we are," he says. He stops the car and we both get out.

"Uhh, so... this is a campground...?" I ask, as I look around me.

The first thing that gives the indication is a wide billboard that has the words "Marui Campground" written on it. Honestly, it wasn't that hard to guess.

I'm actually sort of touched. He wanted to spend some father-son time camping with me? This is great, I'll be sure to—

"I've been reading this manga about girls camping out, and I couldn't resist the call of the wild after that, so here we are. It's been a while since I last camped outside."

...So it was because he read Y*ru Camp and not because he wanted to spend time with me here? Haah, why did I ever think this man was capable of acting like a parent... he looks so serious about it, too.

"Wait, what do you mean by that last part? Have you been camping before?"

I have a very bad feeling about this.

“I used to come here quite a bit back in the day.”

“I don’t think we’ve ever come here in my entire life.”

“It was before you were born. Ever since I had you, my job kept me a little too busy, you see. Hahaha!” he says, in a self-deprecating tone.

“I guess it has been a while, then.”

“Your mother and I came here so many times before we got married, it was like we almost lived here,” he says, in a gloomy tone as he droops his shoulders, betraying his words as the discussion dampens his mood.

“L-Let’s just pay for our stay here and set up camp,” I quickly say, in an attempt to prevent any awkward silence between us.

“Good idea. Could you help get the luggage out of the car as well?”

“How about I help with the luggage, and you go and do whatever you have to do to pay for our stay here in the meantime?”

“Oh, okay. I’ll leave it to you, then,” he says, as he heads for the nearby cabin where the campground reception is located.

First, I unload a small cart we prepared for the trip, and once that’s done, I place all the luggage inside of it. Eventually, Pops finishes paying for our stay, and we head towards the campsite.

Once there, we can see all sorts of people, from rowdy kids with their families, to university student groups, along with other men and women who are here on their own.

I assume one of the reasons my father decided to come here was also because he wanted to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city, and take some time to relax out here. From a personal point of view, I think that it’ll probably end up being quite noisy, but we’ll see.

“Oh, look over there. There’s a nice clear patch of land where we can pitch our tent. Can you help me out, Yuuji?”

“Sure.”

I pull the tent out of the cart and help him set it up. Once we do, we place a

table and a couple of chairs as well.

“Okay, it’s done. Now we can be at ease. Yuuji, just relax for the rest of our stay.”

He then sits down in one of the chairs and starts rummaging through the cart in search of the cooking stove and a pan, and also ransacks the cooler we brought with us

“Right, we haven’t had lunch yet.”

He invited me to this trip so suddenly that I’d almost forgotten about eating. He probably hasn’t eaten either.

From the cooler he pulls out a piece of tupperware, and once he does, he lights the gas stove and places the pan over it. Seeing that he’s not pulling out any raw ingredients or knives or anything like that, I assume whatever’s in the tupperware just needs to be heated and that’ll be that.

He opens the tupperware, revealing some sort of eggy rice mixed with noodles. He pours some oil into the pan and then drops the entire contents of the tupperware onto it without hesitation. After watching him move the food around in the pan for a few minutes, I quickly realize what he’s actually making. It’s a new trend that’s been happening recently in Japan, where people prepare fried rice with cup noodles.

“I saw a cooking youtuber that made this one day, and it made me want to give cooking a try,” he says, while finishing the dish and dividing the food between two plates, handing one of them to me.

“Pops...”

I find myself at a loss while I accept the plate—I never could’ve imagined my dad watching youtubers or even reading manga, but here he is right now. It’s even more surprising because when I was a child, he’d dismiss anything other than a news broadcast as “a waste of time.”

Considering he’s had to deal with the divorce, and me being an asshole all these years, I feel quite guilty for making him go through that.

Anyways, I should probably stop thinking too much about that and giving his

dish a try.

“So, how is it, son?”

“It’s super tasty.”

I think I’m about to cry right now, but not because the food is good. Honestly, anyone could be able to do this without too much effort. I’m close to crying because my dad has changed for the better, in my opinion, and takes an interest in things I like as well, making me a little emotional. I’m terrible at hiding my emotions though, and I probably look like a clown on a TV show.

“There’s no need to be so moved by the taste, son, come on...” he answers while giving me a gentle look.

I’d rather not tell him how I feel right now, but I also want to avoid an awkward silence, so I’ll just shut up and keep it together while I eat the rest of my meal.



Once we finish our food, we sit in front of each other, and I realize that maybe we were going to have one of those super-serious father-son conversations in the middle of the forest. But we’re not saying anything. I don’t think either of us know how to break the ice.

Eventually, we start talking about the things we both like: reading manga and webtoons online, watching youtube videos, and recommending manga we like to each other. Eventually we reach the topic of rom-coms, which is the one we’re both very passionate about, and the conversation turns awkward, so we both fall silent again. In an attempt to avoid the awkwardness, my father pulls out a portable hammock he brought with us and then dozes off on it. I knew the moment he fell asleep because he started snoring like crazy.

I get why he’d do that. He’s probably exhausted from his job. I’ll leave him be and check out what else is going on around here.



The campground is pretty big. The first thing I notice is the vastness of the forest, and the small river that flows nearby as well. The sun is high in the sky,

but the trees block most of the heat. I head towards the river to get a good look from up close

The water seems nice, so I roll up my pants up to my knees, take off my shoes and socks, and soak my legs in the water, which is a lot colder than I expected—it's a great feeling. It's just as nice as being in my room with the AC cranked all the way up.

"Wait, Tomoki-kun?" I hear a feminine voice from behind me say. I know who this voice belongs to, so I turn around, and...

"Makiri-sensei? What a coincidence."

The owner of the voice is Makiri-sensei. She's wearing a different outfit than usual, and she looks surprised to see me. It's been a few days since I last saw her—I visited her father's house to pretend that I was her boyfriend—so I don't feel like it has been all that long since we last saw each other. Nevertheless, I am still surprised, just as she is. I never would've expected to meet her in a place like this.

"R-Right. What a coincidence indeed..." she replies. while checking out her clothes and playing with her hair a little, clearly worried about how she looks right now for some reason.

Her hair is tied up in a bun. She's also wearing a hoodie, shorts, and leggings underneath them, as well as running shoes. Basically, she's wearing a casual outfit right now... oh, now I get why she's embarrassed that I've seen her like this. The only time I've seen her wearing casual clothing was when we went on the student council trip with the others. I've never seen her wear something comfy like this, so maybe that's the reason she's blushing right now. Whatever the case, I've always thought of her as an attractive person, so I think the outfit looks good on her, and since we're at a campground, I don't think it's weird of her to wear casual clothing so she can move around more easily

"Being stared at is embarrassing, you know" she says while giving me a nasty look.

"My bad."

She's right, I probably was staring a little too much there. I'll look away and

try to change the topic so this doesn't turn into a cringefest.

"So, you took your summer vacation, too?"

"Yeah. I took a few days off of work, and here I am."

So basically, she did the same thing as my dad. Nothing out of the ordinary.

"You come around here often?"

"Well, I don't camp all that often, but I like spending some time alone out in nature from time to time. It's a hobby of mine," she answers, while looking at what I'm doing.



“The river’s water looks nice. Is it cold?”

“Yep. It’s cold, but it feels great.”

“I see. Then allow me to join you,” she says, while taking off her shoes, socks, and rolling up her leggings.

Seeing her white skin under the black leggings brings me sudden memories of seeing her in the hot springs some time ago. I don’t want to think about that kind of stuff anymore, though, so I shake my head and look off in the distance to try and put my mind at ease.

“You were right. The water feels pretty nice,” she says, while standing beside me. I can see from the corner of my eye that she’s peeking at me—she looks more cheerful than usual, and I find that charming about her. I like seeing her smile.

“Is something the matter?” she asks, noticing that I was staring at her again.

“Oh, nothing. Don’t mind me,” I answer, as I quickly look away.

“Okay,” she whispers back, followed by, “Are you here alone today as well, Tomoki-kun?” she asks.

I assume that she came here alone, judging by what she said.

“Nah, I came here with my dad.”

“That’s great to hear, ” she answers, with a bright smile on her face.

The reason my dad and I have started to get along better is because of her, so this probably means a lot to her in more ways than one.

“...Yeah, it could be worse, that’s for sure,” I tell her, making her smile.

“I’ll say hi to him later, if you don’t mind,” she proposes.

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t wanna bother you in the middle of your vacation,” I say, worried about ruining her free time.

“Oh, it won’t be a bother at all,” she doubles down.

Oh boy, I hope my dad can behave himself this time, because their last meeting was embarrassing, to say the least.



After our short conversation, we both get out of the river, dry our legs with a towel, and put on our shoes again. I think my dad's still asleep, but I guide Makiri-sensei to our campsite.

"Does your father come around here often?"

"Apparently he came here a lot before I was born with my mother, before the divorce happened."

Though I can barely hear what she says next, I do catch an "I'm sorry" coming out of her lips, followed by "I'll make sure to avoid that topic whenever I see him," which she says while avoiding eye contact with me.

"Sorry for making you worry about that."

As we finish that short conversation, the camp comes into view, and we both can clearly see my father still sleeping on the hammock.

"It appears that he's still asleep. Would you mind if I wait here until he wakes up?"

"How about I hit him on the head to wake him up?"

"I bet he's tired, so leave him be. I wouldn't mind waiting for him while talking to you anyway, Tomoki-kun. I enjoy doing so," she says, while flashing a bright smile my way.

Man, every time she smiles, I just can't keep it together. She probably hasn't noticed it herself, but today I've found her to be way more attractive than usual, and gentler than when we're at school. Maybe it's because she's on a vacation and can just act like a normal person?

"Hngh... ngaah... Yuuji? Is something up?" suddenly says my father, stretching himself as he slowly wakes up. I assume he heard Makiri-sensei and I talking, and that's what woke him up.

"Good day to you, father," says Makiri-sensei as she introduces herself.

"Father...? Um, wait, so did I miss a memo and you married Yuuji, Makiri-sensei?" he says, still half-asleep.

“Forgive him, Makiri-sensei, don’t mind his babbling. He’s still half-asleep... right, dad?” I say, while slapping him in the face—oh man, I wish I could just run out of this campground and never look back. I’m embarrassed beyond belief.

“O-Oh no! Th-That’s not what I meant when I said that! I just...! I just felt like it today, that’s all!” she shouts, while her face goes red as a tomato—no wonder. My father has yet again embarrassed her and implies things that aren’t true, obviously making her uncomfortable.

I find myself at a loss for words right now. Both Makiri-sensei and I are obviously riled up, and silently waiting for him to fully awaken. Eventually, my father takes a sip from a water bottle beside him, and then realizes what’s going on, so he stands up and looks at us seriously—please Dad, please wake up already.

“Makiri-sensei...? Oh, my apologies, Chiaki-san, yes? I hope you can take care of my poor excuse of a son over here. He’s a walking disaster, and he needs a real woman to take care of him.”

“You’re the one who’s a walking disaster, Dad. Why don’t you go back to sleep, but this time forever?” I say, with a poker face, along with a menacing tone, while grinding my fist into my dad’s head as he bows to Makiri-sensei.

“You’ll have to excuse my Dad, Makiri-sensei. His ‘disaster’ of a son and the divorce really did him in, and he’s a man with a broken heart that needs some mending,” I then say, while bowing to Makiri-sensei.

“O-Of course I will, sir!” Makiri-sensei says, answering what my father said before. She managed to stop panicking for a second, but I assume she meant what she said as a teacher, since that’s what she thinks my father is implying.

Ah well, if she took my father’s words as an educator, then I’m fine with that outcome. Anyways, I shouldn’t have her talk with my Dad for too long, otherwise she’ll be exposed to more awkward situations and who knows what other screw-ups my dad could make.

“Uhh, seeing that you two young’uns are already at it together, I suppose it’s about time this old-timer leaves and gives you two some privacy, yeah...” my father suddenly says, while making a run for the parking lot.

Wait, what? What is going on...?

“What the hell, Dad?!” I manage to shout after a few moments of shock, to which I respond by running after him with everything I’ve got.

I manage to slowly catch up with him, but he’s entering the car, and turning the engine on... wait, is he actually leaving?!

“Wait, dad! What are you doing?! What is going on?!” I ask while banging the side window. He lowers it a little, and then says...

“My Son, I apologize for taking so long to realize it.”

“Realize what, dad?! ...Don’t tell me you had some extra beers while I wasn’t looking!”

“Ever since you beat me last summer, I haven’t been able to see the light at the end of the tunnel... also, no, I’m not drunk,” he says, with a serious look. “Even though my sense of justice may be dulled, I think this is the fairest answer I’ve arrived at so far, which is...” he then raises his fist towards me, and triumphantly declares, “Go for the older girls, Yuuji! Those are the good ones!”

Though I managed to avoid his fist by falling on my ass, I’m still confused by what he’s trying to tell me here. Is he joking or something? Maybe I’m just having a bad dream?

“O-Okay...?”

Considering I kinda broke him last year after that beating I gave him, maybe I knocked a few screws loose and this is his way of coping?

“Good luck, my Son!” he finishes, with a thumbs up and a smug grin, followed by rolling the window up once more and speeding away.

I’m in shock right now. Once I get back home, I’m gonna have a few words with this guy, and I sure hope I don’t lose, because otherwise he *is* getting a beating.

“Tomoki-kun! D-Did your father really leave just now?!” shouts Makiri-sensei, who is rushing over to me as fast as she can. She’s having a hard time catching her breath, and she’s in shock as well.

“I don’t know if he actually went home, or if he’s playing the worst prank

ever, but he got in the car and sped away, that's for sure. I'll send him a message," I say, as I pull out my phone, about to send a few texts to my Dad.

Before I do, though, Makiri-sensei interrupts me. "Um, I think he forgot this in the hammock as well..." she says while showing me my father's phone.

"...That is his phone, yeah."

Tch, that piece of shit. He left his phone over here, so now I can't even contact him by any means.

"I-I think that if he intentionally left his phone here, there's no way he'd come back for it, so let's just wait a bit to see if he does come back."

"Right."

"Since I'm an adult as well, for the time being I'll take responsibility for you until your father comes back."

No wonder Makiri-sensei looks so shocked right now. She must think my father is crazy. Who wouldn't?

"Look, there's no need for you to take responsibility for me. This is just my father being an ass, and it's his fault, not yours. Haah... I'm sorry for ruining your vacation like this," I say, while bowing my head towards her.

"Huh?" she exclaims, surprised at my sudden reaction.

"Yeah, I know you came here to spend some time by yourself, and I wouldn't want you to feel obligated to take care of me because of the stupid things my father just did."

"Pfft, it's okay, Tomoki-kun. I think that things like these add some fun to the experience, believe me," she says, while flashing a devilish smile and poking her tongue out a little. "Don't you feel like that, as well?" she then asks.

Is it just me, or is she being really nice today? Like, way nicer than usual. Did something happen?

"Though I don't appreciate the stunt my father just pulled, I do appreciate being able to spend time with you. It's fun, at least," I say, while looking away, unable to make eye contact with her.



“Looks like he isn’t coming back.”

It’s been a few hours since my father disappeared. The sun’s already going down, and people are starting to light their campfires around the place.

Eventually we give up, so Makiri-sensei and I make a campfire for ourselves as we sit in front of each other.

“Tch, of course he wouldn’t want to come back. That middle-aged youtube-addicted man, I swear... haaaaah... oh well, at least minors can stay here overnight, so I’ll pitch my tent, sleep here, and just take the train home tomorrow.”

Makiri-sensei crosses her arms upon hearing my idea. She’s looking at me very seriously.

“Though it may be allowed, as your teacher, I’m not comfortable with leaving a minor unattended on the premises, especially one I’m in charge of at school.”

No wonder her teaching instincts came out here. Leaving aside her relaxed attitude in general, I guess when I mentioned that I was going to spend the night by myself, the teacher within her awakened.

“Oh well. I was hoping to at least spend the night here after the trip I made, but that makes sense. I’ll just go home now.”

“Wait, what?!” shouts Makiri-sensei the moment I say that.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ahem! Ahem! That’s not what I meant when I said that I didn’t want to leave you unattended. What I meant was that I’d be willing to act as your guardian for the day.”

“...What?”

“I bet carrying all the things you two brought back with you on the train would be quite an ordeal, so if you’re fine going home with me tomorrow, we can use my car.”

“Um, wouldn’t that be bad, though? If someone we know saw us being

together here and spending the night in a tent, they'd think... things that you'd probably rather avoid, right?"

I don't wanna say it out loud, but obviously relationships between teachers and their students are prohibited, so I assume she'd want to avoid false allegations from being spread if she could avoid it.

"It'll be fine. I think sleeping in the same tent wouldn't be the best idea, sure, but we can always set up our tents next to each other. That'd give the impression that we both went solo camping and that we came across each other in a stroke of luck."

"Leaving aside the part where I came with my father and he decided to abandon me..."

"Also, don't forget that your father asked me to take care of you just before he left."

"Oh come on, don't tell me you were taking him seriously?"

"Heh, you're well aware that it's anything but a bother for me," she says with a smile. What she just mentioned had a lot of meaning put into it, since we already have been through a lot together. I suppose I shouldn't be worried about bothering her.

"I guess you have a point."

In the end, I accepted her offer and I stayed for the night.



After helping Makiri-sensei move her tent next to mine, she returned the favor by making dinner for the two of us. Well, I call it "returning the favor", but considering I've been causing nothing but headaches for her, all I feel is guilt right now.

"I can only make a simple dinner, so sorry about this," she says, while quickly preparing a bunch of small dishes.

She makes a quick salad, to which she adds some canned tuna and some pre-cooked pasta. It's way better than what my dad made this afternoon. It's also more visually appealing, and she did it flawlessly.

“It’s super good.”

“I suppose this is what it’s like to have a picnic outside,” Makiri-sensei says with a grin.

“Your food tastes good whether you make it outside or in a kitchen, believe me.”

“R-Really now? I probably would’ve made something more elaborate if I had more ingredients. but I wasn’t planning on it, mainly because I just didn’t feel like it,” she says with a light blush, trying to not make it a big deal out of it.

“I wouldn’t mind trying your more elaborate cooking some day, actually.”

“...I suppose the fastest way to get a man’s heart is through his stomach.”

What did she say? She whispered something under her breath, but I couldn’t make it out.

“Did you say something?”

“Oh, nothing... I was thinking the same thing, so I hope you look forward to having more of my cooking!”

“Oh, sure. I totally will,” I answer, while wondering when that’ll be. I’m happy that she’s open to the idea, though.

As we finish our dinner and clean up, the sun sets completely, and everything goes dark as we have a sip of our after-dinner coffees. We’re both sitting on chairs, looking at the tents and campfires off in the distance. We can hear the faint sounds of people talking, the crackling of the firewood near us, and the gentle summer wind blowing. It feels great to be out in nature like this.

“Have you ever come here with Sennouji-san before?” I ask Makiri-sensei, breaking the silence.

Without looking at me, she answers, “I think I’ve gone camping with my family a few times, back when I was a little girl. What about you, Tomoki-kun? Have you gone camping with your father often?”

“Today was the first time, and look how that turned out.”

“It... wasn’t very nice of him to leave you here, yeah,” she says, while looking

at me and forcing a smile.

“It’s okay. He left because he wanted to. You shouldn’t even feel bad about it. I’d understand if you were pissed at me, considering the trouble he caused you... anyways, I hope this isn’t the last time we do this together...”

Makiri-sensei then giggles a little bit, narrows her eyes, and then looks at me for a bit.

“...What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing,” she answers with a smile.

I suppose she’s happy to see me and my father getting along better. Though I know she’s not making fun of me, I don’t really find the whole situation funny.

“I’ll be sure to try and invite my father as well the next time I do this.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I bet her father would be overjoyed to get invited by her.

“I’ll be sure to invite you as well.”

“Okay, nevermind. Now that’s not a good idea,” I quickly say, amazed at the thought of it.

“Really? Oh well,” says Makiri-sensei, sticking out her tongue and smiling a little. Oh thank God, she was joking... but wait, why does she look a little sad?

“Are things still uncomfortable between the two of you?”

“...No, that’s not it,” she says while puffing her cheeks a little and looking away.

I don’t get why she’d react like that. There’s something she’s not telling me, but what is it?

“I feel thirsty all of a sudden.”

That’s understandable. Though summer nights around here aren’t hot, we are still near a bonfire, and that’s making us, or at least me, sweat a little.

Makiri-sensei grabs a water bottle from a cooler she had with her and drinks from it. As she opens the cooler in question, I notice how there’s also alcohol

inside of it. I assume that her original plan was to get drunk alone here with the bonfire.

“Uhh, are you sure you don’t want to drink some of the other drinks you’ve brought?”

“Ugh... well, leaving aside the fact that you’ve already had to take care of me many times while I’ve been drunk, I’d rather avoid drinking in front of a minor, especially someone who happens to be one of my students.”

Okay, so she won’t drink because she’s being mindful of me. I think this is kind of my fault, though. Had I not been abandoned by my dad here, she would’ve been able to enjoy her drinks in peace. It’s her vacation after all, she should do whatever she wants. She shouldn’t have her day ruined because of my damn dad.

“Don’t worry about me. If you really wanna drink, go for it. I-I’ll be sure to look after you if you overdo it.”

“Th-That’s not what I was worried about, okay?!” she shouts back, startled.

“I mean, at this point, I should be considered as some kind of a certified legal guardian whenever you get drunk, so I’m okay with it.”

After that statement, she glares at me for a few seconds, followed by showing surprise, and then a smile.

“Ohh, I see how it is. You’re mad at me because I called you a kid that needed a guardian, aren’t you? That’s why you’re teasing me right now. I see you still have a little petulance in you after all. That’s pretty cute, little boy.”

That statement of hers pissed me off a little, but I then realized that maybe she was right and I got a little annoyed when she insisted that I needed an adult around me.

“That’s not really what I meant. Since you offered to look after me, I thought that I should at least return the favor by looking after you if you needed it, that’s all.”

She then stares at me with a blank expression for a few seconds, then reaches for her cooler.

“Return the favor so we’re on equal terms... I will admit, Tomoki-kun, that despite our student-teacher relationship, I do consider us to stand on equal footing,” she says, followed by her whispering “...Or at least I’d like to believe that’s how it is.”

I force a smile so this doesn’t turn awkward, “So you don’t deny treating me like a kid earlier,” I say.

“Oh, you shouldn’t worry about that. Once you graduate from high school, you’ll be an adult just like I am,” she follows, while still rummaging through the cooler. I can’t see her face right now, but I do wonder how she’s reacting to this whole conversation.

“Honestly, I can’t wait.”

“Mhm, look forward to when it happens,” she says, while finally turning around—her cheeks are flushed red as she waves a can of beer in one of her hands. I assume she’s blushing because the fire is quite hot.

“Well, considering I have a guardian now, are you okay if I have a drink or two?”

“Try not to overdo it, but sure, knock yourself out.”

“Sounds good,” she says while opening the beer can, followed by the pleasant fizzy sound that happens when a can is being opened. Then, without even pouring the contents into a glass, she takes a long gulp of it directly from the can.

“Mphaah...” she exhales once she’s downing her first go at the beer can.

“You wanna try drinking? Well too bad, you can’t,” she says while smiling.

Whenever she starts drinking alcohol she always becomes more... easygoing and happy. That’s how she always behaves.

“No worries. I wasn’t thinking of it anyway,” I say, half-asleep already.

“Yup. Wait until you’re twenty if you really wanna try it,” she says while placing the can on her lips once more. The more she drinks, the happier she gets, and eventually it seems like she’s having the time of her life.

“Though I’m not really thinking about drinking right now, I do wish that we

can someday have a drink together, but only once I'm 20."

She widens her eyes in silence for a moment, and then says...

"I-I get it, okay? Once you're over twenty, we can. I wouldn't mind having a drink or two with you either, Tomoki-kun. Actually, we could drink together under these same circumstances. Sitting in front of a bonfire, looking at the night sky..."

After a short pause, she then continues, "Oh right, I'll also teach you how to actually drink properly, so you don't make the same mistakes I did when I started."

"Look at the model teacher over here," I say with a smile, to which she answers with one of her own.

"Yup. Model teacher indeed."

"Seems like I'll be looking forward to having a nice drink, then."

"Hahaha! Yeah, I honestly can't wait for it either."

Actually, is it just me, or...? "Hey, Makiri-sensei, it's a little dark so I can't see very well, but I think your face is kinda red."

At first, I thought that it was an optical illusion created by the bonfire, but her face is definitely red. Before, I thought it was because of the heat of the bonfire that was making her feel hot, but there has to be another reason for it.

"What?! R-Really?! No! I'm fine!" she says while looking away and sticking her hand in front of my face so I can't see her.

So she is embarrassed right now. I knew it. The reason she's so red is... "You've already had too much to drink, haven't you?"

The moment I say that, she goes back to her serious look again, and her blush is completely gone. It's like she's completely lost any intoxicated joy she once had.

"Haah," she sighs, looking tired. "I haven't even finished a can yet," she says while shaking her beer can so I can see it.

Wait, why is she glaring at me now? Did I say something mean? I don't get it.

“I bet you have no clue as to why I’m mad at you right now,” she rightly guesses.

“Have I said something rude?” I timidly ask, causing me to glare at her again. It quickly changes into a laugh, though... okay, now I have no idea what’s going on.

“Are you sure you aren’t drunk already?”

“Yeah... maybe I am a little drunk... so just ignore me,” she says, while flashing a gentle smile my way, making my heart skip a beat.

“Oh my, your face is red now too, you know?”

“...It’s just the light from the bonfire playing tricks on you.”

“Maybe you’re right...” she teasingly answers—dammit, she saw it clear as day.

After that, we kept talking about menial stuff, and we had a relaxing evening.



After Makiri-sensei drove me home in her car the next day, I stopped feeling angry at dad for what he did. At some point in the middle of the night, I just let it go and decided that I’d call him out a little for what he did, but nothing more.

...Or so I thought.

“Sorry about what happened, Yuuji. I know that leaving their son alone at a campground isn’t something a normal father would do.”

“It’s okay. I’m more than aware that you’re a special case, so it’s whatever.”

“Heh, by the way,” he continues, “When do you think I should come around Chiaki-san’s parents’ home to say hi?” he asks, with a straight face.

His suggestion reignited my rage, and we had a fist-fight after that.

Chapter Three

The Side Character and the Beach Trip

It seems like summer went by in a flash this year. It took me until now to realize that there's barely two weeks left before we go back to school.

Right now, I'm in my room, checking an exercise video so I can train at home as per usual, when suddenly, my phone vibrates. Someone sent me a message, and that someone is... Asakura, by the looks of it.

"Yo. If you have no plans for tomorrow, wanna spend the day at the beach?"

Huh, well it looks like we're both in luck, because I don't have any plans tomorrow. His invitation was sudden, but I'll accept it nonetheless.

"Sure thing. I'll tag along," I quickly reply.

Asakura's reply comes quickly as well, because he answers with "Nice! See you tomorrow at 8 AM in front of the station, then."

It takes about the same amount of time to get to the beach as it takes to go from the station to school, so it won't take that long. Normally I would say meeting at that time is a little too early, but it's fine, since going to the beach is almost the same as going on a vacation, so I assume we'll spend the entire day there. Man, I'm excited for tomorrow already.

"Got it," I quickly answered once more. To which Asakura replies at nearly lightspeed once more, "One more thing, don't invite any girls, especially Kana or Touka, got it? Don't betray me!" followed by a sticker of what seems to be an angry old man.

...Why did he even feel the need to send me this particular sticker? Asakura has the strangest taste in emojis.

"I mean, sure, that's fine, but why?"

The reason why I'm asking is because I promised Touka that we'd go to the beach together, so I was thinking that this could be a great chance to make

good on that promise. I don't exactly get why he wouldn't want any girls to tag along.

"I don't know if I'd be able to handle seeing Touka or Kana in swimsuits dude, you have no idea."

...Wouldn't inviting them be the best course of action, then? What the heck is his problem?

"Not gonna lie dude, they're gonna be all over you if we all go there, and I'd rather not be depressed after a day at the beach. You feel me?" he continues, followed by posting yet another sticker of the same old man as before, but this time smiling.

Though the old man is smiling, almost grinning, I can feel Asakura's bitterness and pain behind it. I understand what he means, though, so I'll just give him what he wants.

"Okay, understood."

Instead of trying to continue this discussion or overthink my response, I instead go back to watching the video and wait for tomorrow.



The next day, I did as Asakura told me. We meet in front of the station, and then arrive at a place where we need to take a bus. After a couple of stops, we eventually arrived at the one we were waiting for. After a five minute walk from the bus stop, we finally arrived at the beach.

It's still quite early in the morning, but the sun is already blazing. In attendance today are Asakura, Ike, Kai, and myself.

"There's the sea! Let's go, boys!" shouts Asakura the moment we arrive, as he gazes at the vast sea view sprawled out before us. He's already wearing his swimsuit too, ready to go.

I check Asakura out, and I can't help but notice his chiseled physique, which is most likely due to all the exercise he does at his club. He's also moderately tanned already, which makes me assume that he runs outside quite a bit, or must do reps with his friends outside. He does volleyball, but indoors, so

normally you wouldn't expect him to look like this. I can tell that he's definitely more tanned in some places than others.

"Man, the sun's really beating down on us today," follows Ike, while he squints his eyes a little, clearly having trouble seeing because of it.

Ike is already handsome, and looks good no matter what he wears, but believe me when I say that he looks even better in a swimsuit. The girls passing beside us all have their eyes on him, brazenly staring at his abs, the presence of which is made even more curious by the fact that he doesn't belong to any sports club whatsoever.

"There's so many people, though. And so early too, damn," says Kai, with a forced smile.

There's girls around the place who are also giving him looks, mainly because he, too, has some muscle on him. Probably thanks to all that training he says he's been doing recently. I mean, Kai is also a good-looking dude, so it makes sense to me.

"Um, so what exactly are we supposed to do here? It's kind of my first time coming to the beach with friends, so I'm not sure what happens now," I ask Asakura.

"Well we should probably put on our sunblock first, unless we want our skin to be burned by the end of the trip," says Kai.

"Oh, I see. I've barely ever used any of that, but it makes sense."

"Whenever I train with the other club members outside, we tend to use this, because otherwise we get some nasty burns, and those hurt quite a bit, man. I actually brought some special sunblock today, so hopefully I can make my tan look better than it does now," follows Asakura.

"Since you're not used to applying sunblock, I'd be more than happy to put some on your back for you, Senpai!" says Kai, with a serious look in his eyes.

"Help me out too, man. Don't leave me hanging," says Kai, in a joking tone.

"...I actually didn't bring any sunblock, so I'm kinda screwed," I say, as I realize my mistake.

“No need to worry, Senpai! Use my sunblock, please!” quickly replies Kai, as he pulls out his own bottle of sunblock.

“Sorry about this. And thanks, I’ll use yours, if you don’t mind,” I say, as I accept the bottle.

Lemme see, how does this work again...? Apparently it says here that this stuff is waterproof. Makes sense. We’ll be swimming in the sea, and we’ll probably sweat quite a bit, so this is good.

After glancing at the instructions, I start applying sunblock on my arms and chest.

“Um, Senpai, help me put some sunblock on my back too. If you don’t mind, that is,” says Kai with a more childish tone of voice. I mean, he offered to lend me his bottle, so the least I could do is comply.

“Sure, man.”

I then take the bottle and start applying the sunblock on his back.

“I remember thinking how impressed I was with your physique back at the hot springs, but seeing it up close reminded me of it once again. You look good, man,” I say, making Kai’s face go completely red.

“I-I’m so happy to know you think that of me, Senpai...” he manages to blurt after a short silence.

“Okay, your back is all done.”

“Thank you so much! Okay, Senpai, now it’s MY turn to do it to you.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, man,” I say, as I hand over the bottle back to Kai.

Kai places some lotion on the palm of his hand, and starts running it all over my back.

“It’s... so big....” says Kai as he starts hyperventilating for some reason. He’s still moving his hands quite fast, so at least he’s concentrated on his task, it seems.

“You don’t need to be that thorough if you don’t want to.”

“Oh no, I’ll be thorough, alright,” says Kai, followed by him continuing to

apply the lotion until he says “Okay, you’re good now.” With a smile, he then moves his hand away.

“Th-Thanks for going the extra mile, Kai.”

“You’re always looking out for me, so this is the least I could do, Senpai. Happy to help,” he answers with a big smile.

Honestly, seeing him respect me so much makes me think that I really don’t deserve having someone like him as my friend. He’s such a nice guy.

“Guys, I think everyone’s on top of this already, but stay hydrated, okay? We don’t want anyone passing out in the middle of the day. I prepared some sports drinks, so be sure to have them around and drink whenever you feel thirsty, yeah?” Ike says out of the blue.

He then gives us each a sports drink from a cooler he was carrying around, followed by all of us taking a swig of our drinks.

Impressively enough, while Kai and I were applying sunblock to each other, Ike already prepared the beach towel we brought to stay here, as well as placing a parasol that we rented for the occasion.

“So what now?” I ask Asakura.

“Okay, then... How about we race to that rock over there?! Last dude has to pay for the winner’s lunch! How about it?!” shouts Asakura while he points towards a rock standing out in the middle of the sea ahead of us, approximately half a kilometer away from where we are.

“I may be the youngest here, but lemme tell ya that I can actually swim pretty fast. Went to swimming classes and everything back when I was in grade school,” says Kai.

“I can swim pretty well too, so...” I follow, which makes Asakura cross his arms.

“I’m gonna assume that Ike knows how to swim as well, so... let’s actually not make the loser pay anything! Haha! But how about we simply do it to see who’s the fastest?!”

I’m gonna assume that learning all of us can swim has made him reconsider

his chances of winning, or his chances of not ending last.

“That sounds good to me,” I say.

“I’m in too,” says Kai right after me.

Kai, Asakura, and I then look towards the sea, and get ready to sprint, when suddenly...

“Wait!” shouts Ike, in a serious tone of voice. He doesn’

“Wh-What’s wrong?” asks Asakura, clearly as confused as I am about Ike’s sudden shout.

“Before we get in the cold water, we have to warm up. Otherwise, one of us could end up accidentally hurting ourselves,” says Ike, as serious as ever.

Kai, Asakura, and I look at each other, and decide to do as he says instead of arguing, just in case. Why did he feel the need to interject, though?

“Yeah, I guess it would be bad if one of us had some sort of cramp in the middle of our race,” says Asakura, to which Ike answers with a nod and a smile.

We then do as he proposed, and exercise for a bit before doing anything. After a while, we feel like we’re more than ready to go at it this time around. Now Ike can’t complain.

“It’s so cold...! Not,” I say, as I touch the water. To be honest, the river near the campgrounds I found on the camping trip with Makiri-sensei was ten times colder than this. To be honest, I wasn’t expecting the seawater to feel so different from the river. I’m surprised.

“Honestly, it’s almost lukewarm, which is kinda relaxing more than anything,” says Asakura.

“Is this what global warming’s all about? Ouch, man. It hurts my soul, not gonna lie,” adds Ike, visibly in pain.

“Wouldn’t this make it easier for us to swim, though?” asks Kai.

“I suppose you have a point there,” answers Asakura.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, Kai, but what style is your specialty, again?” asks Ike out of the blue.

“All I can do is freestyle,” says Kai as he puts on his goggles.

“I guess I’ll swim like that too, then,” says Ike as he adjusts his goggles and the backstrap on his head.

Seeing the both of them makes me feel like they’re going to take this race seriously. I’m lucky that Asakura decided to call off the bet, because against these two, I’m not confident I could win, and...

“Okay guys, is everyone ready? Here we go! Start!”

Asakura, without us noticing, was also ready, and quickly signaled us to start the race in order to give himself an advantage over us. Leaving aside the fact that he used a childish method of giving himself a petty advantage, we all have no choice but to quickly follow and start swimming as well.

I try to swim with the same style as the other guys, but the waves are making it quite difficult for me to advance, which is completely the opposite of when I swim in a pool. Kai and Ike are already swimming quite far ahead of me—I would expect that from Ike, since he’s pretty much good at everything, but I’m really surprised by how fast Kai can swim. They leave me behind, and eventually arrive at the rock, but I’m not sure who was the fastest, since I can’t see very well from here. I also managed to arrive at the rock after some more effort.

“Nicely done, Yuuji.”

“You two were fast, man. Who won?”

Kai forces a smile, and then answers, “Ike-senpai did. And here I thought I was fast, but damn, he is a missile.”

That’s quite the compliment.

“Ah well, I started before you did. You also developed quite some muscle, so it didn’t help you become faster. Hahaha!” answers Ike, with another forced smile for some reason.

Just as he finishes his sentence, Asakura arrives at the rock.

“Y-You guys are too frickin’ fast, for real...” he says, clearly tired.

“Good one, man.”

“I wasn’t expecting swimming to be this tiring, lemme tell you that,” says Asakura in response to my short praise.

“Why were you trying to even compete with us, to the point of even making the loser buy lunch, if you’ve never swam this much before?” asks Kai, realizing how tired Asakura is.

“Swimming is actually part of the volleyball club’s training. It fits in as part of our cardio regime, so I thought I was decent, okay?”

“I think you definitely overestimated yourself, though you’re lucky you called off the bet before the race started,” I add.

He then looks off to the side and starts whistling, like some clichéd manga character would do in these kinds of situations.

“You were quite fast too, Yuuji. Do you have any experience with swimming?” asks Ike, to which I answer by shaking my head.

“Well, not exactly. Back when I was in elementary school, you know how swimming classes tended to be more about playing with your friends in the pool, yeah? Well, since I kinda had no friends back then, I could only swim, so that’s all I did.”

I still remember those days clearly. I had absolutely no one to play with, so while my classmates were having fun, I could only swim by myself.

“I guess thanks to that, I got decent at swimming.”

Kai, Ike, and Asakura look at me with a smile.

“Guess we’ll have to do a certain something to Tomoki, then. Wouldn’t you guys agree?” Asakura says while flashing a mischievous grin.

“Huh? Uhh, dude?” I ask.

“You know, what we all used to do back in our free time when we were in the school’s swimming classes,” says Asakura, without caring to answer my question.

Ike seems to know what he means by that, because he smiles as well.

“Oh, so you wanna do *that*...”

“Sounds good to me!” follows Kai, also seemingly in the loop, which is the reason why he’s grinning, too.

I have no clue what these three are talking about, to be honest.

“Anyways, let’s go back to where we can actually place our feet on the ground, yeah?” proposes Ike.

Once we get back to the beach, though...

“Don’t you go crazy on me now, Tomoki!” suddenly shouts Asakura as he clings onto my back.

“Huh?!”

“I would advise you to not resist, Yuuji,” follows Ike.

“Uhh, sorry about this, Senpai,” follows Kai.

Both Kai and Ike then restrain my legs. Normally I wouldn’t let my guard down so much, but I completely let myself go this time around. Now I’m completely bound, arms and legs alike, and finally I realize what’s going on: this is what these three were talking about when we were at the rock. They want to throw me into the water while grabbing me by the arms and legs.

“He-Hey, wait a second...!”

The three of them start laughing and grinning in response. They then start a countdown, and the moment the count reaches to zero, they fling me into the water.

For a brief second I feel like I’m flying, but that doesn’t take too long to fade, because moments after that I find myself plunged into the water once more, completely losing my sense of direction. After placing my feet on the seafloor and regaining my senses, I then came out of the water. When I open my eyes, the first thing I see is those three gremlins laughing to each other.

“So, how was the experience, Yuuji?” asks Ike, laughing uncontrollably.

“Could’ve been worse,” I answer.

“That’s the true classic everyone has experienced back in their school’s swimming pool free time, man.”

“You’re not hurt or anything, right, Senpai?!” asks Kai, worried.

“I’m fine. In fact, that was fun, in a way. I’ll be sure to pay you back for the experience!”

I then grab Kai by his waist and lift him up, making him shout in surprise. Without giving him time to react, I then throw him away. Once I see him land on the water, my sights are now focused on both Ike and Asakura.

“Who’s next?”

“Asakura! You and I will fight him together!” shouts Ike, to which Asakura responds with an enthusiastic positive reply. Unfortunately for him, Asakura quickly sneaks behind Ike, wraps his arms around him, and holds him in place.

“Now! Tomoki!”

Ike looks surprised at the sudden betrayal. I head towards them, and grab Ike by his legs while Asakura grabs him by the arms. We’re both ready to throw him.

“Asakura, you traitor!” shouts Ike right before his demise.

“I stand before you as a representative of those who aren’t as popular as you, Ike! Retribution is at hand!” answers Asakura.

Honestly, I have absolutely no clue what that was all about, but both Ike and I actually stop for a moment and realize that Asakura looks seriously aggravated right now for some reason.

“Damn it aaaaaaall!” shouts Ike, right as Asakura and I throw him into the water.

“Phew,” I sigh, right as I place my attention on Asakura. We’re both silently looking at each other now.

“...Nicely done, Tomoki!” he suddenly exclaims, trying to sound excited.

We then high-fived. Unfortunately for him, I quickly grabbed him too and flung him in the water as well, since he, too, was required to pay for his crimes and receive retribution for his misdeeds towards me.



After a long swimming session, all of us leave the water fairly hungry, right before lunch time, too. That's why we decided to grab a quick bite at a nearby restaurant. It was quite full by the time we got there, but fortunately we didn't have to wait for too long until we were seated.

"This place tends to be absolutely packed with people by noon, so we arrived at the perfect time," says Ike, to which Asakura follows with an enthusiastic "Let's go, dude! We're lucky, then!"

"Yeah, you definitely are. Had we followed through with your bet, you'd be paying for someone's lunch right now," follows Kai with a grin.

"You flatter me, dude. I do make the greatest decisions sometimes, don't I? Come on, tell me how good I am at predicting my doom," says Asakura while puffing his chest and hitting it with his fist.

"Asakura-senpai is such a cheerful guy. Wouldn't you agree?" Kai asks me, clearly tired of Asakura having an answer for literally everything. To which I reply with a forced smile, not knowing what to say.

We checked the menu and ordered shortly after. I was actually surprised, mainly because the waitress, and definitely other people around us, aren't showing any signs of terror after looking at me. Some are clearly spooked out, but not as much as usual, and I'm quite thankful. In fact, this has been a perfectly normal day at the beach. Not gonna lie, it's quite exciting to be treated like any other guy out there.

While we wait for the food, we have a chat between us about random stuff, you know, guys talking about school and other things.

Eventually our food arrived, and before us we now have a big plate of yakisoba, another one of curry, and a big okonomiyaki. The smell is incredible, and I can't wait to dig in. Everyone else shares that sentiment, because we all shout "Let's eat!" and immediately begin devouring the food.

"I love the flavor of cheap yakisoba, it just tastes different," says Ike.

Indeed it does. Just by looking at the yakisoba, it's quite clear that they're definitely not the highest quality noodles or condiments that I've seen out there, but they're still nice.

“Yeah, and they’re still expensive as hell. They’re lucky this is a beach restaurant, otherwise I’d never pay this much for these. Hahaha!” follows Asakura as he’s tasting the curry rice. I’m not exactly sure why, but he seems quite excited for whatever reason.

“Yeeeeeah, I kind of agree with you two, alright...” says Kai, as he eats his okonomiyaki. I’ve actually tasted it, and the flavor clearly gave away the fact that it was frozen before being served to us.

I mean, I’m eating an okonomiyaki of my own right now, but personally I think it’s nice, nothing too bad.

We don’t take too long to eat, since we focus on our food for the majority of the time.

Asakura finishes first, “Uhh, guys, I’m still hungry, so I think I’m gonna order something else. Anyone else want something extra?” he asks.

“Wait, don’t order anything yet,” says Ike quickly after. “I actually brought a watermelon. It’s in the cooler, so it has to be at the perfect temperature now. How about we all go to our little fort and have a taste of it there instead?”

“Always ready for these situations. Nice going, dude,” I compliment him.

“Really?! Nice! Yeah man, let’s do it!” says Asakura.

“Thanks, Ike-senpai! You rock!” Kai follows.

Ike then nods, “I also happened to bring a big stick along, so let’s play smash the watermelon!”

“Sheesh, dude. Like I said, always ready for everything,” He’s always planning ahead. I can’t believe how smart he is. I feel dumb in comparison, but that’s totally fine.

Once we pay for the food, we quickly leave the beach house and return to where our things are, ready to get our hands on that watermelon. Ike heads to where the cooler is and opens it, revealing several ice packs, along with a bunch of drinks, and a small watermelon. The moment he shows it to the three of us, we all instinctively clap, impressed.

“Let’s get ready, then,” says Ike. He prepares a spot nearby, where he places a

sheet of newspaper, and on top of it, places the watermelon. Immediately after, he then grabs a stick, big enough to be able to break the watermelon.

“I actually made this stick last night just for this, believe it or not,” he says.

“Wow. I mean, of course you did,” I say impressed.

This is interesting, though. I wasn’t expecting Ike to be looking forward to this trip so much, to the point of spending a portion of last night making this stick for the occasion.

Anyways, the last thing he pulls out is a blindfold to cover the eyes of whoever has to break the watermelon. And with that, all of the preparations are ready.

“I think if we let Ike hold the stick, he’ll easily break the watermelon in two seconds, so how about I try first?” says Asakura.

He has a point. I feel that if Ike was the one blindfolded, he’d manage to not only hit the watermelon, but break it into 4 equally-divided pieces, and the game wouldn’t last too long.

“Wait, what do you mean, man? Come on,” says Ike while he laughs.

No one seems to be against his decision, in any case, so Asakura goes first.

“Okay, Asakura. You gotta spin around in a circle ten times, and then the game will start,” says Ike, to which Asakura complies and starts spinning.

Once he spins ten times, Asakura enters what I suppose is a stance, as he totters around with uneven footing, clearly dizzy after all that movement.

“Where is it, guys?! Any clues?!” he shouts, asking us to give him directions.

“Right ahead of you!” says Kai, to which Asakura answers by slowly advancing, not sure of where he’s stepping towards.

“Yeah, man! Just go forward, then crouch, and then press x while you motion forwards!” shouts Ike, a grin plastered on his face.

“Oh, I see how it is! You want me to do the Shoryuken from Street Brawlers! Here goes nothing! Shoryuuuuken!” shouts Asakura as he drops the stick for a moment and motions like Ryu would.

Ike and Kai seem to be either completely unamused by Asakura's antics or don't know what's going on, because neither reacts to what he did. Meanwhile here I am, laughing my ass off.

"...I knew I shouldn't be trusting Ike today. He's having too much fun being a clown. Tomoki, you're my last hope! I'll trust your directions!" Asakura says. as he picks up the stick once again.

"Whaaa-? You're not gonna trust me either?" says Kai, clearly annoyed. To calm him down, Ike simply places his hand on Kai's shoulder while he smiles at him.

Meanwhile, I'm in a little bit of a bind right now—I can't exactly tell Asakura what he needs to do in order to win the game, otherwise it would end too fast. I have to deceive him from time to time so it stays interesting, but... he said he trusts me! And I can't betray this trust he's placed on me!

"Okay, then..."

I start guiding his steps. Kai and Ike try to tell him to do other stuff, but he only trusts me at this point, completely ignoring everything they say.

"Okay, stop! The watermelon's right in front of you. Just move a few steps to the right, and then strike down!"

Asakura does what I say, and then... "Okaaaaay! Are you guys ready...?!"

He then motions the stick upwards, and swings it down. It should've hit the watermelon, but well...

"Whoa. What's wrong, Ike?" I ask as I realize that Ike is now between Asakura and the watermelon: he's managed to catch the stick in mid-air, preventing it from hitting the watermelon. He looks more serious than ever. Is he alright?

"We must not play with our food. It is better to cut it nicely, for we will enjoy it far more," he says, his gaze more serious than I've ever seen.

"Man, Ike's been really acting weird today," I mutter.

"You're acting weird, Ike-senpai. But I'll assume you're just having fun," Kai says.

"Indeed, I am having fun," Ike answers with his weird tone as he nods.

“Huh, so it was true after all. I think I know what’s going on, guys. It honestly relieves me,” suddenly says Asakura, seemingly calm as he removes his blindfold and throws the stick away.

“Um, so what is it?” I ask.

“Whenever only guys go to the beach together, apparently the collective IQ of the group decreases by quite a bit... and I think that’s what’s happening to Ike right now.”

“Whoa, that’s a thing?”

Normally, I would believe that’s the dumbest thing Asakura’s ever said, but seeing Ike act like this definitely makes me believe every single one of his words.

Instead of following the conversation, Ike simply picks up the stick again and grins, “So! Who’s my next challenger, hmm?” he says, as he looks at Kai and I. Both of us look at each other and shrug, and...

“I take it that this is my chance to get revenge on you for winning that swimming race we had before, Ike-senpai?” Kai asks.

“I hope that means I can go at it too,” I follow.

Before Ike says anything back, Asakura interjects, “Okay guys, just be careful. Remember that while Ike’s intelligence stat has been nerfed while on the beach, his offensive and defensive stats have been massively buffed. If we were in an RPG now, he’d be a dangerous berserker, so yeah, be careful,” he warns us.

This intelligence debuff must be doing wonders on Asakura now, too, because he’d never say something like this out loud. Honestly, I can’t wait to have him regret every word he said today later on down the line, or watching him react as I remind him either way.

“No need to worry about us, Asakura-senpai,” says Kai.

“Because we, too, have become dumber as well!” I shout.

Both of us will definitely regret these words as well, but if Ike is dumber, we’re all dumber.

We then grab one stick each, and try to split the watermelon while Ike defends it.

Though we did this for a while, Ike managed to stop every single one of our attempts. And shortly after, he blindfolded himself, and just as we predicted, he managed to split the watermelon in 4 perfect portions, all while needing no directions from us whatsoever.



We finish eating the watermelon, and after that we simply decide to stay chilling under the parasol, since the sun's pretty intense right now.

Asakura doesn't seem to take to what we're doing very kindly though, because he suddenly snaps, "What are we doing nothing for over here?!" he exclaims.

"What are you so mad about, dude? We're here to hang out, and that's what we're doing right now, yeah?" answers Ike, completely unfazed. I can say with a lot of confidence that he speaks for the rest of us right now.

"Oh, come on now! We're guys, and we're at the beach, so there's obviously only one thing we can do in a situation like this!" he answers, making both Kai and I look at each other, puzzled.

Asakura, realizing that we have no clue about what he's talking about, places his hands on his head and makes the most dramatic pose ever, "Aaaargh! Are you guys for real right now?! I can't believe you!" he shouts, clearly upset, "We gotta hit on the girls with the cute swimsuits! That's why we're here in the first place!" he continues, making sure to exaggerate every word and action as much as he can.

"Certainly not. You proposed that we go and swim before, so that's strike one."

"Strike two would probably be you enjoying eating at the beach restaurant. No mention of girls there either."

"You had quite a bit of fun when we were playing with the watermelon, so that's strike three."

After Ike, Kai, and I finish our arguments, Asakura starts to feel the pressure.

“L-Look guys, don’t make it sound like I came here just thinking about girls, okay? I actually have fun hanging with you guys too, for real,” he manages to whisper, his cheeks growing a little red.

“But this is when things get real, guys! This is the beach! There’s girls with bikinis all around us! So it’s time to test our luck, I say!” he shouts while raising his fist to the air. I must say, he seems super excited at the prospect, which is nice to see.

All in all, while I don’t understand why hitting on random girls on the beach would be something guys normally do, I do get why he was so keen on bringing Ike and Kai to the mix today. They are handsome, so I’m sure that’s a card he can play in his favor.

“If that’s the case, then why did you bring me along? I’m scary-looking, and definitely not as handsome as Ike and Kai over here, so all I’ll do is scare away any girls you’d wanna hit on, man.”

“Oh, don’t you worry, I came well-prepared,” Asakura replies as he pulls out a pair of sunglasses from one of his pockets, giving them to me.

“Here, wear these glasses, and let’s fix your hair a little...” he says, while playing with my hair. After a while, he looks at me, smiles, and nods.

“See, guys! Does Tomoki look like an actual fuckboy, or what?!”

Um, should I take that as a compliment? I really don’t know right now.

“I don’t think the sunglasses are gonna fix my face, dude...”

Asakura is in very high spirits today for some reason, I really don’t get why.

“Look, normally I’d agree with you, but when you’re at the beach, the game changes, you feel me?”

“I think I do. Wearing glasses feels natural whenever you’re at the beach, so no one’s going to look at you funny because you’re wearing them,” follows Ike.

“Yo, Senpai, you really look amazing when you have the glasses on!” says Kai.

Look, while I understand that being here somehow lessens the fear people

have towards me—just look at the employees of the beach restaurant, they didn't even feel threatened by my presence—I don't think this simple pair of glasses is going to solve anything, really. I could walk up to a girl and still scare the crap out of her.

Ike suddenly says something Asakura wasn't ready to hear, though...

"Um, I'm not into the idea of hitting on girls, though..."

"...What?" says Asakura, now looking gloomy.

"Yeeeeeah, I kinda agree with him on this one," follows Kai.

"I... think Touka would get mad at me if she caught wind of me doing this, so..."

I deliver the last nail to Asakura's coffin. His face is now emotionless.

Anyways, this is for the best. If I tried hitting on a girl, I'd probably just traumatize her, so if we can avoid that, it'll be for the best.

Asakura, seeing that none of us are gonna play his game, falls defeated on the spot, as we all look at him dumbfounded. Was he really looking forward to this so much?

"I was so looking forward to this... my summer vacation as a second year... my chance to get away from my stinky club filled with guys and get hot and steamy with some cuties like Ike and Tomoki do all the time!" he utters, his voice trembling, and his eyes watering up.

Taking stock of his suffering, the three of us look at each other, and decide that we'll go along with what he wants to do just this once.

We extend our hands towards him with a smile, and tell him that it's okay to have hope.



"Okay everyone, our target is that group of five older-looking girls," says Asakura, who seems to be back in the world of the living, as he points out the group of girls in question.

The group he's pointing at consists of a bunch of blondes, clearly older than

us, but not by much. They're probably college students, judging by their looks. They're all pretty hot, and save for Ike and Kai, who are good to go with any woman, I don't think they'd get near Asakura, or me for that matter, since we'll probably look too young for them.

"Okay dudes, let's go get 'em! This is the plan, so listen up: Ike and Kai start the conversation, making it easy for me to join. Tomoki, you stay still and be menacing, you know the deal!"

While Asakura seems to be quite enthusiastic about this whole ordeal, Kai, Ike, and I are pretty sure that they're not even going to give us the time of the day. We look at each other, and after telepathically agreeing that this would go terribly wrong, we head towards the girl.

Just before we call out to them, though, two tanned guys who seem to be way more experienced at the game than we are approach them first.

"Ah shit!"

The girls don't seem to take long to send the guys away, because both of them walk away from the girl group after merely ten seconds of conversation, which makes Asakura shout a hearty "Let's fucking go!"

"Um, Asakura, are you really sure we have any chance with those chicks after seeing those two get absolutely destroyed?"

"I think if I was alone, then yeah. Fortunately, we have Ike-senpai with us here!"

I still am worried about one thing, regardless if Ike is with us or not on this one. Ah well, let's try and we can regret it all later.

"Hey there, girls! Would you like to hang out with us? If you have some free time, of course," opens Ike, with a very friendly smile.

"We're on a guys trip to the beach, but you looked friendly and seemed like you'd like to have fun!" follows Kai, as best as he can.

...Yeah, that's what I was afraid of. Those sounded like normal greetings, definitely not something one would say to try and hit it with girls for sure. I wonder how things are gonna go...

“Whaaat? More guys trying to hit on us?”

“Just go away, you pests.”

Not even bothering to look at their faces, two of the girls immediately tell them off.

“Whoa, now they’re actually kids!”

“Are you guys high schoolers or something?”

“Yeah, we are. You in college or somethin’?” asks Asakura, who seems to believe that things are somehow doing well.

“Yeah, we’re college girls!”

“Which is why we prefer grown men, not kids, so... later...”

Those two are still not even bothering to look at us, while the remaining three girls who haven’t said a word yet are whispering to each other. I can barely hear what they’re saying...

“...Not interested in guys hitting on us, but those are those two real cuties, or is it just me?” one of them asks.

“Yeah, they’re both sooo good-looking...” follows another one, clearly commenting on Kai and Ike.

The other two girls heard what the ones in the back said, so they finally turned around to get a look at Kai and Ike, making their initially harsh expressions become surprised ones, followed by them starting to play with their bangs, and awkwardly coughing.

“Actually! I kinda just remembered that younger guys are my type, after all.”

“Sure thing! Let’s hang! What do you say?”

“Oh wow! You’re so muscular! I love how you both look!”

“Do you go to any clubs at school or something?”

Everything happens quite fast after that. Both Ike and Kai get surrounded by the five of them, while Asakura and I remain behind, not knowing what to do.

“I play soccer at the moment,” says Kai.

“I don’t do anything right now,” follows Ike, who’s just as surprised as Kai is right now.

“What are you so shy about? Oh my God, you’re soooo cute ≡”

I check on Asakura to see how he’s doing, and I immediately can tell that he’s in hard depression mode. His plan was pretty good by having the two best-looking guys open the conversation, but he didn’t take into account that they’d hog most of the attention and leave him behind.

I mean, look at us right now, here we are standing here like idiots while the girls are all over Kai and Ike.

I don’t particularly care, and I try to tell Asakura to not sweat it too much, but...

“I’m thirsty. You wanna come with me to the shop over there to get something?” one of the girls tells me as she pulls me by my arm, not waiting for me to answer.

...I can’t believe the glasses work.

As I let myself be carried away, I check on Asakura, who is looking at me like he wants to die right now.

...I’m sorry, Asakura. I’ll make it up to you one day.

Chapter Four

Excitement

The girl and I leave Asakura behind, and once we're far away from everyone else...

"You weren't trying to hit on us like the rest of them were, right?" asks the girl.

"Huh? I... suppose so, yeah."

She seems so calm and composed that it throws me off a little, but I answer as truthfully as I can.

"I came here with my friends to have a good time, too. I don't have the time nor the interest in guys or anything like that," she continues, as serene as before.

"Uh-huh."

"That's why I pulled you out of there. You looked like you needed someone to help you out, and I took that as an excuse, y'know?"

"Ohh, I see."

I guess that makes sense. Compared to Asakura, who seemed very intent on getting a piece of the action, I definitely didn't give off any vibes of excitement, so she must've interpreted that as a lack of interest. I mean, I guess I was her excuse to get away from the action.

"Yeah, so uhh... thanks for that," she says while looking at me straight.

"Oh no, you're the one who saved my ass back there. I should be the one thanking you."

She stops in her tracks, making me do the same.

"What's wrong?"

"If I'm being honest, seeing you completely uninterested hurts my feelings a

little, y'know?" she says teasingly.

"Um, okay...?"

"Oh, don't give me that. Couldn't you at least give me a compliment on my swimsuit?"

"I thought you didn't want men hitting on you?"

Instead of immediately answering, she places one of her fingers on her lips, "You have no idea how a girl's heart works, do you boy?"

"I guess I don't," I coolly answer, though in reality I can feel my heart ready to beat out of my chest.

I'm normally used to being around beautiful girls like Touka, Kana, and Makiri-sensei, but this girl is honestly pretty cute too. Her one-piece swimsuit makes her look even better, accentuating her curves quite a bit. Her medium-length hair, reaching down to her ears, and her visible nape are impossible to miss.

Who wouldn't get nervous if a girl like this suddenly started teasing them?

The girl seems to grow impatient, because instead of waiting for me to answer, she looks into my eyes and says, "Look, sure, I'm not overjoyed at the thought of guys hitting on me, but..."

She smiles, and her gaze locks with mine as she moves closer to me

"...If it's you, I might be okay with it, y'know?"

"Huh?"

"My name's Karen. What's yours, cutie?"

I'm initially shocked by this turn of events, but I eventually manage to utter my own name in reply.

"So you're Yuuji-kun, huh? Come with me for a sec," she says while pulling me by the hand.

"We're not heading towards the shops. Didn't you want something to drink?"

She flashes a devilish smile, "I was just hoping to have a chat with you for a little bit, take our time... what do you say?"

What does she mean by that? I mean, sure, I'll follow along if she wants to go somewhere, but I'm not sure what to make of this just yet.

"Ah! Yuuji-senpai! There you are!"

"We've been looking for you, Yuuji-kun!"

But before she can lead me away, two familiar voices I recognize all too well call my name from behind, making me turn around. They are Kana, wearing a swimsuit, and Touka, who's wearing a T-shirt on top of hers.

What in the world are these two doing here? I guess they had the same plan as us guys, but just with girls? Then again, even if that's the case, Kana said that they were looking for me, so I'm probably missing something here

"...Um, do you know them?" asks Karen in a low voice as she looks at both Touka and Kana, clearly puzzled.

Touka and Kana aren't saying anything. Instead, they direct their attention towards Karen, and then to the fact that we're holding hands, immediately making their gazes turn as cold as ice.

"Oh my gosh, Senpai. Are my eyes deceiving me, or are you getting chummy with some other girl that's not me? Who is she, by the way? Hm? You wouldn't have started thinking that your hot and super cute wasn't enough for you, would you? Did you come here without me and felt like you could just hit on other girls however you please? Hmmm?"

"I thought I told you to let me know when you got tired of Touka-chan so I could be with you instead, right Yuuji-kun?"

Normally this would've set Touka off and they'd start arguing, but this time they're quite in sync, their sights equally focused on me.

"Um, I'm gonna ask again just in case... who are these two girls?" asks Karen once more, this time visibly nervous.

"I'm kind of his girlfriend!" Kana answers first.

"Don't mind her, she's just a weirdo. I'm his *actual girlfriend*. And... *who are you, again?*" continues Touka with the coldest tone she can utter.

...I don't have a single clue why Kana considers herself to be "kind of my

girlfriend,” while Touka is more than well aware that we’re not exactly in an actual relationship, but leaving that aside...

“...You’re kidding me, right?” says Karen, as she looks me straight in the eyes, shocked.

Instead of saying anything, I simply nod.

“I’d rather not get into trouble, so I’ll just leave for now. Bye bye!” she shouts while forcing a smile, immediately running away as fast as she can. It takes mere seconds from her to disappear within the people crowding the beach.

Touka and Kana still have very angry expressions on their faces, so I should probably defuse the situation now before it becomes untenable.

“Um, why are you two here?”

“Oh no, you’re not going to get away! Isn’t there something you need to tell me, Senpai? Hmm?!” immediately says Touka. Although she has a smile on her face, the burning flames of hatred reside within her cold stare.

Look, I get why she’s mad. I’m supposedly in a relationship with her, so technically I shouldn’t be hanging out with other girls like Karen, because then it would be hard for me to explain the reality of the situation if I got caught.

I should probably apologize, but I’m pretty sure I’m not getting away that easily.

“No wonder he’s cheating on you. He’s probably grown bored of you already,” says Kana, without letting me say anything.

That only makes the situation worse, as Touka stiffens her smile even more, “He never considered you to be a woman, *Natsuo-chan*, get over it already.”

I can see a vein popping on Kana’s forehead, but she doesn’t immediately snap like she usually would, which is kinda weird. Instead, she takes a few deep breaths, and looks at me right in the eyes.

“Don’t you have something you need to tell me as well, Yuuji-kun?” she asks in the most provocative voice possible, as she wraps her arms around my back.

Kana doesn’t even look mad at this point, which is good, I suppose. Anyways, does she want me to comment on her swimsuit? It seems like she’s just fishing

for a compliment.

She's wearing a simple white bikini without anything else. It accentuates her natural curves quite nicely, and I think it matches with her personality quite a bit, which is straightforward. I also have to comment on how much it accentuates her... chest, if you know what I'm saying. I ended up staring for a bit too long, but I quickly looked away, since I realized that what I was doing was rude.

My stare doesn't seem to go unnoticed though, because Kana blushes a little bit, "You can keep looking, I don't mind," she bashfully says.

"Okay, Miss Sexual Harassment, calm down! Get away from my boyfriend, and stop using cheap seduction techniques, you vixen! And you, Senpai! Stop actually falling for it!" Touka suddenly interjects, giving me a death stare. "Like it matters!" she continues, "No matter what Hasaki-senpai says, you're mine, right, Senpai...?"

Okay, don't fuck this up, Yuuji. Touka is basically screaming for me to say the right thing here, so I've gotta do this right...

"The swimsuit looks good on you," I finally say to Kana. I know I probably shouldn't say this after Touka just screamed at me, it is the truth, and the truth must be said.

"You did not just say that!" instantly replies Touka, who is now actually angry at me.

"Tha-Thanks. I've never had anyone compliment me so directly, but... I-I'm quite happy to hear that you like it. Teehee..." says Kana, her cheeks flushed red.

"Okay Senpai, it was all fun and games before, but your time with your stalker has ended. Is. There. NOTHING. You. Need. To. Tell. Me. Too?!"

For a moment I thought about apologizing to her, but instead of doing that I should simply go all in and face the consequences later.

"Your t-shirt looks quite nice, too."

"Are you kidding me right now?" asks Touka, irritated.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? I never intended to cheat on you or whatever that looked like. Asakura wanted us to help him hit it with some girls, and we couldn’t say no to him. One thing led to another, Karen then separated me from the rest of the group, and you know...” I attempt to explain as I take off my sunglasses and bow to Touka, asking for her forgiveness.

“...It’s okay. I knew you wouldn’t try your luck with other girls, since you have me and all...” she whispers.

Okay, good. She doesn’t look annoyed anymore. My life no longer hangs in the balance.

“You could’ve just told me you were going to come to the beach, though. Be sure to include me in your plans the next time,” she continues, this time looking away, “You promised me that we’d come together, so you hurt my feelings a bit seeing you here, y’know?” she continues, this time in a sad tone of voice.

Ohh, so that’s why she was actually mad. Not because I was caught with another girl, but because I kind of broke my promise with her. I agreed to Asakura’s request to not bring the girls along too quickly, and I should’ve remembered the promise I made with Touka. That’s on me. I’ll try to do better next time.

“I’m sorry.”

“...You will make up for this, won’t you?” she asks in a timid, low voice.

“Of course I will.”

“Well, if that’s the case, then I guess I’ll have to forgive you this one time...” Touka says, heaving a sigh. “But only this one time, got it?!” she shouts immediately after.

Touka then grabs me by my hand, “Let’s hang out together for the rest of the day, then!” she says, this time with a smile on her face.

Kana positions herself beside me and locks her arms with one of mine, “I’ll be tagging along as well, okay, Yuuji-kun?!” she says right after.

Touka and Kana get into one of their usual arguments after that, but... man, I can’t let Asakura see us like this. I think I’d kill what little pride he has left.



Kana, Touka, and I walked back to where Ike and the others were supposed to be, since we were hoping to reconvene with them. As we walk, I give a glance to both of the girls and ask, “So, err, why are you two here, again?”

Part of me doesn’t want to believe that this was all a coincidence, so I’m asking just to make sure. Touka seems to know the answer, because she flashes a smile and looks at me right after, “Otome-chan told us.”

“Tatsumiya told you? How?”

“When Asakura sent the message to Haruma about going to the beach together, he happened to be in the Student Council room along with Tatsumiya-san. She asked about what the message said, and Haruma told her about your plan today,” Kana answers.

“That’s when Otome-chan sent me a message, worried that you might be hitting on other girls when you have me, the best girlfriend in the world, so I took the matter into my own hands, and it looks like neither her intuition nor mine were wrong in the end,” follows Touka, giving me an angry glance.

“Tatsumiya-san also sent me a message, urging me to come with her so both you and Haruma wouldn’t do anything that you weren’t supposed to, and here I am!” says Kana.

“Uh huh, I get it now...”

So basically Ike told Tatsumiya about our plans for today, and that’s why they’re here today. I get why Ike decided to tell her. I mean, I wouldn’t have expected her to orchestrate a simultaneous trip with the girls at the same exact time.

“Good thing we managed to find you before you got into some unsavory business with that random girl you were with.”

“Yeah! You’d better think about what you’ve done, okay, Yuuji-kun?”

Both of them don’t sound particularly happy. I mean, in my defense, I wasn’t even trying to hit on anyone in the first place. Anyways, let’s try changing the subject

“So where’s Tatsumiya, then?”

Instead of answering, both Touka and Kana look at each other and force a smile.

“Ah, I see her. There she is!”

I can see Tatsumiya off in the distance, who seems to be quite angry, alongside Ike, who is... sitting on his knees, looking down in shame. At first, I wonder what could be going on, but quickly enough I realize that Tatsumiya is giving him the sermon from hell.

“I find this behavior quite outrageous from you, the Student Council President! Someone like you is supposed to be an exemplary model for the rest of us, and to think you would be at the beach trying to... trying to hit it off with random girls like that! Repent for what you’ve done!” she shouts.

Damn, she’s really laying into him.

“I wouldn’t have expected you to go straight for those... extroverted-looking girls either! How about you go for someone of your age, perhaps a little more introverted, hmm?!”

...Nevermind, her personal feelings are clearly what’s at stake here.

“Otome-chan found Asakura-senpai and the others trying to hit on this group of girls, so she brought it all to an end and dragged them here,” says Touka.

“You should’ve seen Tatsumiya-san, she actually lost her mind. It was a sight to behold...” follows Kana, forcing a smile.

I guess that explains why the other girls are nowhere to be seen.

“I know, my bad. Asakura asked me so nicely that I couldn’t bring myself to say no to him. Man, is this what some people call ‘the beach effect’? Damn it all! Why didn’t I stop him?!”

Ike seems to be quite more excited than usual for whatever reason.

“Pre-President...?” asks Tatsumiya, clearly concerned. For a moment, at least. Immediately after, she blushes, “It appears that you’re acting way different than usual, Prez, wow...”

I wanna know who coined the phrase “Love is blind, ” because after seeing this, I can conclude that is indeed true.

“...Very well. Though you have definitely made a mistake today, I suppose I’ll let this slide. Though I expect this not to happen again in the future. Exercise some restraint the next time, please,” says Tatsumiya, heaving a sigh.

Well, it looks like she’s finished scolding Ike, so I’ll call out to them.

“Hey, Tatsumiya. How’s it going?” I greet her, making her twitch and quickly turn around.

“...Oh, Tomoki-san. Greetings,” she says in a curt tone.

She’s obviously wearing a swimsuit like the other girls, but her style gives off a more refined vibe, especially given her choice of wearing a pareo. I know it’s rude of me to say this, but I see why she did this. Her legs are long and stylish, but her chest is not as big, so she made sure to place more emphasis down there... I’m the worst for thinking that, aren’t I?

“I won’t repeat myself like I did with the President over here, but you have a girlfriend, Tomoki-san, and an excellent one at that, so I would advise against trying to cheat on her next time,” she continues while glaring at me with a murderous aura about her.

“You tell her, sis! You better not make me sad again, you hear her, Senpai?!” Touka shouts immediately after, her eyes glimmering.

“Okay, okay. I’ll be careful. So... where are Kai and Asakura, by the way?”

“I gave them an earful just like I did with the Prez right after I disrupted their manner of flirtatious behavior with that group of... ahem. Anyways, after that, they went to the sea to swim for a bit.”

“Damn, so they’re off to swim...?”

Maybe that’s what Asakura needed to get his mind off of the harsh reality he was facing back there... or maybe he’s trying to hit it off with another girl using Kai as bait. Asakura can get back in a good mood quite quickly, so that’s completely possible.

Whatever the case, I’m glad he’s not here. If he saw me with Kana and Touka

on each side, it would definitely kill his pride, and I don't want to make my friend go through that.

【The Side Character's Friend and his Junior // Asakura & Kai POV】

"Fuck me, man... sorry, Kai. I bet you'd be surrounded by girls in the hundreds if I weren't around. I'm such a burden..." says a young man, his teary voice breaking the other young man's heart.

He forces a smile, determined to comfort him, "It's okay. I have someone I like already, so it's not like I'm interested in hitting on random girls at the moment. If you want me to help you out, I'll gladly do it, dude."

"I see... honestly, knowing this, I feel bad having you come with me just so I can hit it off... but ah well, I'll take you up on your offer. Let's try our luck again."

The young man, bracing himself for what's next, nods in agreement with his counterpart

As Asakura thinks about who to try his luck on next, suddenly, a ball falls on top of his head.

"Ouch! ...What the? A ball?" he asks, picking it up.

"Sorry about that!" a womanly voice calls out.

"Are you okaaaay?" another female voice follows.

'Could this be it?' Asakura thought to himself. Was that his chance to naturally start a conversation with a pair of girls? Without thinking about it, he quickly turns around and presents them the ball back, "I'm fine! Actually, it sounds like you're having fun with the ball, so would it be okay for us to join you two?"

"Whaat?"

"Are you... trying to hit on us, or something?" one of the girls asks, dumbfounded.

'Oh shoot,' he thought to himself as he got a good look at the girls for the first time. He had to clear the situation no matter what.

Kai on the other hand has noticed that Asakura is having a tough time, and forces a smile, too.

“What should we do? Hmm...”

“They look like nice guys... so why not?”

“What have I done?” internally grieves Asakura.

“Pandora’s box has been opened,” thinks Kai, as he tries to not to think too much about what’s going on.

Who would’ve known that this meeting would change Asakura’s life for good?



“Okay guys, what should we do?” Ike asks.

Nobody seems to come up with anything, because an awkward silence ensues for a while, until...

“Touka, you seem like you’ve come here many times before, so maybe you have a better idea than us?,” I ask, breaking the silence.

“Not really... Honestly, I haven’t been here many times. Mainly because, y’know, guys are always hitting on you, and it’s kind of annoying...”

“Uh huh.”

If it was any other girl I’d probably say that they got on their high horse, but given what I know about Touka, I can see her being constantly hounded by guys if she ever came here by herself. I mean, I can feel the guys around us eyeing Touka, and I know that if it wasn’t for Ike being with us, they’d be trying their luck on her. Those who aren’t directing their attention towards Touka have their eyes on Tatsumiya and Kana, though.

I may have just realized this, but it looks like I’m at a gathering of models right now, except that I’m just a normal-looking guy sticking out like a sore thumb.

“Ah! I got an idea! Why don’t we play with a beach ball? We could rent one over there, see?” Kana says while pointing out an establishment in the distance.

I never have played with a beach ball before, but I’ve always seen in magazines how it’s the usual way to play at the beach, so that makes sense.

“That sounds like a good idea,” says Ike.

“Interesting. I’d be up for it,” follows Tatsumiya.

“Oh wow, as calculating as ever, I see, Hasaki-senpai...” says Touka in shock.

“Huh? What do you mean by that?” Kana asks, clearly not knowing whatever Touka’s trying to imply here.

“*Sigh* All you wanna do is run around for the ball and get my boyfriends to stare at your tits swingin’ around,” she answers, while pointing at Kana’s chest.

I follow Touka’s finger, and end up being completely entranced by Kana’s huge chest, to which she reacts by blushing and locking her eyes with mine.

“I-I wasn’t planning to do that! But if Yuuji-kun wants to look at them, I already said it was okay, so it’s not like I would’ve cared if he did! So... yeah, don’t worry, Yuuji-kun, you can keep staring if you want. *Wink*”

Oh shoot, she knew I was looking! Look away, Yuuji! Look away!

...Of all the places I had to look away to, why did it have to be Touka’s face? Oh man, she looks like she wants to kill me right now... she’s going to say something, isn’t she?

“Damn, what a weirdo...” says Tatsumiya moments before Touka can say her piece, referring to Kana.

“Ta-Tatsumiya-san?! I’m not that kind of girl, okay?! Y-You’re actually scaring me a bit right now...”

I feel bad for Kana right now. Tatsumiya does look scary, so no wonder she’s intimidated by her. I know that burning hatred in Tatsumiya’s eyes: she despises big breasts, to the point of seeing anyone who has them as her sworn enemy, silently cursing Kana for all eternity, wishing for what isn’t hers...

Honestly, seeing Tatsumiya play with her pareo as she gives a death stare to Kana is kind of cute in its own way... or is it? ...Nevermind, she’s scaring the crap out of me, too.

“You tell ‘em, Otome-chan. She’s a molester and everyone must know of her evil deeds!” shouts Touka along with a triumphant smile. I think by the end of this trip, she and Tatsumiya are gonna be good friends.

Tatsumiya turns around to check on Touka's chest, realizing that it's still bigger than hers, and looks down, dejected. Seeing this, I decide to step in, "Uhh, sorry about this, Kana. I don't really mind if you're like that, but is there any t-shirt you could wear like Touka does so the other people don't stare at you?"

And by other people I don't only mean the guys around us, but Tatsumiya as well, so she doesn't feel down. Not like I'll ever say that out loud, though.

"I-If you say so, Yuuji-kun... okay, I'll get my parka!" she then says, heading to the place where she left her bags, along with Touka's and Tatsumiya's.

While she's out of the picture, Touka suddenly grabs me by my hand and pulls me away.

"Well then, Senpai! While she's putting that on, let's go get that ball!"

"Oh! Err, sure thing, but we should tell Ike and Tatsumiya that we're going," I say.

"We heard you, so we'll leave it to you two," says Ike in the distance.

"Y-Yeah, we'll leave it to you two," follows Tatsumiya, now smiling and stealing glances at Ike, her face blushed in a deep shade of red.

Nice, I managed to leave them both alone, so now Tatsumiya must be happy.

Anyways, as we make our way towards the rental shop, suddenly I realize that we're not exactly heading there, but somewhere else completely.

"Um, Touka? Where the hell are we going? The shop isn't this way..." I ask her.

"I-I simply wanted to ask you something in private, okay?" she suddenly answers, her cheeks completely flushed.

What does she need to ask me? And why in private? Wouldn't anywhere work?

Anyways, instead of saying anything else, I decide to follow her lead and simply wait until we arrive at her intended destination.

"I think we'll be fine here," she says as we arrive at a place where there's

barely anyone around. I mean, I don't think this is completely quiet either, but as long as it works for her...

"So what did you want to ask me?"

Instead of answering, she looks away, her face completely red. She takes a while, but after a short period of silence, she resolves herself and looks me straight in the eyes—Is what she needs to ask me that important?

Suddenly, she takes her T-shirt off.

"What the?! What are you doing, Touka?!" I shout as I try to look away.

...But wait, she's wearing a swimsuit, so there shouldn't be a need for me to look away in the first place. Ah well, this is kind of embarrassing, but I'll take a good look at her.



Her black swimsuit, contrasting her pale skin, along with her red cheeks, are illuminated by the sunlight quite well.

“Damn, you look good,” I immediately say, voicing what’s on my mind without any issues.

“You mean it?” she asks, clearly worried.

“Yeah! I mean, I don’t know what I should say, but... you look awesome.”

Touka immediately goes redder than before, which means... that I fucked up, for sure. Shit, is what I said just sexual harassment? I need to fix this! Say something!

“I-I’m sorry! Forget what I said!”

“I-I don’t think you should be sorry for saying that...” she answers while fidgeting with her fingers.

Man, I know for a fact that she cared about what I said, so I can’t let this stand. I need to carry the conversation elsewhere!

“Um, so why did you take your shirt off, again?” I ask, making Touka look me in the eye.

“Maybe because I wanted to show my boyfriend the swimsuit I was wearing before anyone else? Duh... you don’t think it’s weird or anything like that, right?” she asks with a smile, though I know for a fact that behind that smile she’s being completely serious right now.

Is she mad at me for something I did? Um, I’ll try to see what she means...

“I don’t think there was a need for you to bring me here if you wanted to do that... right?”

Touka seems to take actual offense at what I said, because she looks away for a moment, clearly annoyed, and then starts saying in a low tone of voice...

“I’m... actually not very confident in how I look. If I knew that I was going to come to the beach today, I definitely wouldn’t have had ice cream the day before yesterday, since I wanted to go to the beach with you wearing this, and... considering I’d be going with that pitiful excuse of a beach model with bigger chest than mine, I thought... you know...”

I mean, I don't wanna compare Touka and Kana if I can avoid it, but Touka shouldn't envy Kana at all. She looks fine as she is, too. So good, in fact, that seeing her like this kind of excites me a little. Though I see Touka's point of view. Kana is her rival, and not only did she "outdo her" in tennis, but she feels like she's outdoing her in the chest size department, making her reluctant to show off her body.

It appears that Tatsumiya may yet gain an apprentice on her dark side of hatred towards big boobs.

"Not like I'd want to show myself off to anyone but you, anyway."

Man, she knows what to say at the right moment. Well done, Touka. I could blush right now, but I gotta keep it together.

I remained silent for a while, making Touka worry in return, "I would've liked it if you chose the swimsuit for me, but I didn't really have much time to pick and choose, so... yeah. So what do you think? Do you like it?" she asks, while pointing at her swimsuit.

"Oh yeah, I think it looks really good on you. I told you before, but yeah, you look awesome," I answer, which makes Touka heave a sigh of relief.

"Good to know! I know you're a fan of black coffee, so I imagined that the black-colored swimsuit would be to your liking, too!"

"That's quite the way to assume something, alright..."

"Well, yeah! It made me realize that while I may know a lot about you, I actually have no clue about a lot of things you like and dislike, y'know? It made me realize that, well... I don't know you as well as I thought I did. I'm hoping we can get to know each other better from now on, Senpai!" she says while blushing.

Damn, when she blushes, she really does look cute as hell.

Out of words to say, I simply manage to utter "Sounds good to me," and look away.

Man, I'm telling you, maybe she doesn't realize it, but goddamn Touka knows how to be appealing when it counts.

I can't help but smile at the realization of this. I mean, how could I not?



Anyways, after that short moment I spent with Touka alone, we rented the ball and returned to where Ike and the others were waiting for us. Once we got there we started playing, and eventually, both Asakura—looking completely dejected—and Kai—trying to smile, but completely failing—make an appearance.

Just looking at them tells me everything I need to know. Asakura tried to hit on some girls, and he completely failed at it. Ah well, I'll try to console him, if even just a little.

I head to where Asakura is, and place my hand on his shoulder.

"Yo, Tomoki-senpai, you're gonna find this funny, but actually..."

"Kai, for the love of all that is holy! Please... *please* don't say anything!" Asakura says, desperately cutting off Kai.

Maybe they don't wanna tell me that Kai ended up hogging all of the attention and Asakura didn't? I can't really tell judging by how conflicted Kai looks right now. I mean, if I was Asakura, I wouldn't feel so down about this. It doesn't matter in the end, right? There are plenty of fish in the sea.

"Ah! Look, there they are!"

"Thanks for spending your time with us, guys!"

"We'll be sure to call you two again, so let's hang out another time!"

Two girls appear in the distance out of nowhere, clearly talking to Asakura and Kai, but the moment they do, Asakura shivers, slowly turning around.

Hold up, wait a minute... did they actually succeed? Why does Asakura look so gloomy, then? Lemme check on the girls, again... oh wow, they must be like ten years old or something like that.

"Um, Asakura...?"

"Don't you dare say anything. I don't know who they are, they're paid actresses," immediately says Asakura before I can finish my sentence, unable to

look at me while talking.

“Teehee... well then, see you around, Yoshito-kun!” says one of them while waving her hands straight to Asakura.

“Um, Yoshito, my dude...”

“Shut your whore mouth, Tomoki!” says Asakura. I could feel the agony in his voice as he said that.

Damn, he really fucked up this time.

But then again, I think he wouldn't try to hit on ten year olds, so there's probably a story behind all of this that he hasn't told us. Ah well, whatever. I'll place my hand on his shoulder again.

“We're playing beach volleyball. I don't know how to serve, so could you teach me?”

Asakura raises his head the moment he hears me, apologizes to me for some reason, and tears start welling up in his eyes. Instead of saying anything, I nod and turn around to go back to playing with the rest, but...

“Wait, Asakura-senpai, did you just... try to hit on a bunch of preschoolers?” suddenly says Touka.

“Are you okay...?” follows Kana.

“...It appears I've misjudged you, Asakura-san,” says Tatsumiya, delivering the final blow as she gives a disgusted glare at Asakura.

Asakura in response falls to his knees and lets himself go, only managing to say something under his breath...

“Kgh! Just fucking kill me already...”

Damn, Asakura. I didn't know you took that so personally.

Instead of saying anything, I tap his shoulder once more. It's all right, Asakura. Sometimes mistakes happen, I'm sure you didn't mean to.



We enjoyed playing beach volleyball and swimming for a while after that. Time flies, and soon enough the sun starts setting below the horizon. After

deciding that we should return, we take a commemorative photo with our phones and leave shortly after.

On the train ride back, I was mostly asleep, clearly more tired than I'd initially thought. At some point we split up, changing trains to arrive at our respective homes, and that was the end of that.

Upon arriving home, I took a quick shower and threw myself into bed right after. I start hearing the sound of the waves in my head, and as I slowly fall asleep, I suddenly hear my phone vibrating quite a bit. I check what it could be, and our text message group has new messages, mostly picture uploads from today. Tatsumiya made an album. Most of the pictures have a clear emphasis on Ike and Touka, so I assume she made it for her own use more than anything else. Honestly, looking at these pictures makes me glad I went today and shared so many moments with everyone else.

Suddenly, I see the screen changing, as someone's calling me. It's Touka.

"Hey."

"Good evening, Yuuji-senpai! What were you doing just now?" says Touka, clearly happy judging by her tone of voice.

"Was just checking the pictures being uploaded in the group."

"Oh? Did you enjoy seeing me in those pictures she took?"

"Looking at you made my eyes water up. Literally."

"Hm? What are you talking about?" she asks, confused.

Dammit, I was trying to be funny there.

"U-Uhh, nevermind."

Oh God, I want to throw the phone away and bury my head in the ground right now.

"Anyways! I'm your main heroine, if you catch my drift, so obviously that's why I ask!" she continues in a sweet tone of voice.

I may not be able to see Touka right now, but 100% she has that smug grin of hers whenever she teases me like this.

“Aren’t you embarrassed saying stuff like that?”

“I-If you don’t play along of course I will be, you moron!” she says while clearing her throat, “I had fun today,” she follows.

“Yeah. Me too.”

“Though I’d appreciate it if the next time we can spend the whole day together, and not just half of it.”

“Sure. I bet this won’t be the last time we go with everyone.”

I can hear her groan on the other side the moment I say “everyone.” I legitimately don’t understand her sometimes. Why would she be upset? Wouldn’t going with everyone else be more enjoyable?

“Um, Touka...?”

“Haah... look, Yuuji-senpai, what I was trying to hint at is that I want us to go without everyone else. Just you and me, like having a date, you know...?”

“Oh, that...” I say, not knowing how to reply.

“Heh!” she sneers, “Are you perhaps embarrassed to hear me say that, Senpai?” she asks immediately after.

She has that smug grin on her face again right now, I bet.

“...I suppose I am, yeah.”

“Not gonna lie, Senpai, my heart is beating pretty fast, too. Being straight with you still feels super embarrassing. Looks like we’re both in a bind, haha.”

“I’m not going to dignify that with a response.”

“Whaaat?! Come on, Senpai, at least try to sympathize with me, you meanie!”

“Man, I’m so tired right now. Can’t we talk another day? Right now I feel like I’m gonna pass out at any minute.”

“...Yeah, same. I’d love to keep going, but I’m exhausted too, so let’s leave it for another day. Night night, Senpai.”

“Good night.”

“Sweet dreams!”



I throw the phone away, turn the lights off, and close my eyes.

I know that her teasing is all supposed to be a joke, but it feels so real sometimes that it confuses me, to a point where I don't know how to react to it.

Chapter Five

Checking on Someone

It's the day after we all went to the beach together.

I was checking on how many volumes were sold for the manga I was reading, and calculating in my head how much money the publisher would've made. Suddenly, derailing that train of thought, my phone starts ringing. It's Ike, so I decide to stop what I'm doing to focus on him.

"Hey, man."

"Hey, Yuuji. Sorry for calling you so suddenly. Can you talk right now?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

I tend to be free most of the time, so there's no point in saying otherwise.

"Nice. Would it be okay if you came over to my place?"

...Okay, that's something I wasn't expecting him to ask me. He caught me off-guard.

"Weird of you to ask me that. Is something wrong?"

Back when I played with Natsuo, we used to do everything outside, and Ike was my first "proper" friend up until I started high school. He's always been busy with his activities at the student council, so I've never really had the chance to check out his place. While this is kind of weird, I've at least gone over Makiri-sensei's place once, so that makes me feel more at ease about this whole situation.

"The thing is, Touka isn't feeling very well."

"Touka? Is she okay?" I immediately ask him without hesitating.

"It's just a summer cold. Probably caught it yesterday after spending all day outside."

He doesn't sound too concerned, which means that it can't be that big of a

deal. At least that makes me feel better.

“Why do you need me to come over, then? Wouldn’t it be better for me to not bother her at all?”

The best thing is to stay in bed and relax, or at least that’s what I believe.

“Um, could you come and check on her either way?”

Right, I get it now. He wants me to visit her since I’m her boyfriend, and he thought I’d get worried and all of that.

“Will she be okay with me being there?”

“I don’t know, man. You know her better than I do.”

I suppose he has a point. If we’re in a relationship, of course she wouldn’t be bothered.

“The thing is that I also need to run some errands, and my parents aren’t home either. I don’t wanna leave her alone, so that’s another reason why I’d like you to come over.”

“Oh, I get it. Sure, I’ll pop by.”

“Great! Thanks!” he quickly says, clearly happy. “I’ll send you the address in a text message, so just come by whenever.”

“Got it. I’ll send you a message whenever I think I’ll be there.”

“Sounds good. I’m counting on you, Yuuji.”

“Talk to you later,” I follow, as I end the call right after.

Shortly after he sends me a message with the location and the nearest station. I’ll be going by foot, and as far as the maps app is telling me, I’ll take at least 30-40 minutes to get there.

I get ready and leave for Ike’s house not long after that.



It takes me 40 minutes to get to Ike’s place, but I’ve finally arrived. I’m bringing a sports drink with me, as well as a small gift for Touka from the convenience store that I got on the way.

The house in front of me is quite big, and I can see expensive cars parked in front of it.

I already more or less knew this, but both Ike and Touka always seemed quite preppy, so it makes sense they live in a house like this.

It takes some courage for me to do so, but I finally press the intercom button, and quickly after I hear Ike's voice, telling me to come in, followed by the sound of the main gate opening.

"Thanks for stopping by, Yuuji. Come on in," Ike says with a smile.

"So, how's Touka doing?" I ask as I place my shoes at the entrance.

"Last time I checked she was resting in her room, but I am curious as well. Could you go and check her temperature and that stuff? Her room is on the second floor," he says teasingly.

We climb the stairs, and eventually he places himself in one of the three doors, telling me that he's standing in front of her room. He knocks three times, and... "Hey, Touka. How are you doing?" he asks.

"I'm fine, I guess," I hear Touka say on the other side, her tone clearly less cheery than usual.

Honestly, that didn't answer any of my questions. "I'm fine" could mean anything.

"Okay. I'll be heading out, so you just stay in there and take it easy."

"Yeah yeah."

"I called Yuuji so he could keep an eye on you. If you need anything, ask him."

"Yeah, sur-... Wait, what?!"

Touka's answer sounds curt, and shortly after she opens the door slightly.

"Why would you say something like that? There's no way you called him here, you creep. Weirdo..." she mutters in an angry tone.

"I'm not joking. I asked him to come, see?" he says while taking a step back and letting her see me.

"...Huh?"

She looks into my eyes and quickly slams the door right after. I look at Ike confused, but all he does is force a smile and shrug. It doesn't take too long for me to start hearing Touka on the other side.

"I know you came all the way here and all of that, but... I'm gonna sound awful, but can you leave?" she says, clearly tense.

...Maybe she doesn't want to get me sick? Why else would she want me to leave?

"Sorry if I bothered you by coming. I brought you a drink and a small gift from a convenience store. Have them whenever. I knew I'd be bothering you by coming..."

I turn around, ready to leave, but Ike places his hand on my shoulder, preventing me from moving.

"Look, man, she's just embarrassed because she doesn't want you to see her without her makeup on or her hair done. She's very fussy about that kind of stuff."

"What?! Hey, you loser! That's not true! You're soooo annoying!" she shouts, immediately opening the door once more, this time completely.

I can see now what Ike meant. Her face is redder than usual, and she definitely seems to be struggling at the moment, judging by her looks.

"...Senpai, I'm getting tired of my brother, so just come on in," she says reluctantly while making way for me.

"Okay, Yuuji. I'll leave the rest to you."

"Are you sure that's what you should be saying, man?"

It's like he doesn't care how she treats him.

Instead of saying anything, he simply laughs it all off and goes downstairs. I hear the main door open and close shortly after, which means that he's left.

Holy shit, he completely ignored me and left me here! I was planning to at least stop him and hope to get an explanation, but... ah well, it's too late now. I'll go inside Touka's room.

As I enter, the first thing I notice is how neat it is, and how nice it smells.

“Stop staring at my room so much. It’s embarrassing, okay?” she says while puffing her cheeks a little.

“Uhh, my bad.”

“Sit over here,” she says while preparing a cushion for me.

“Sure, thanks,” I say as I sit on it.

Touka ties her hair up in a ponytail and lies down in bed.

“I know I said this before, but sorry about me coming and all that. Ike asked me if I could stay and keep you company while he was out, so...”

Touka sighs, “My brother is just dumb. He’s making a big deal out of this, when it’s not that bad in the first place.”

I don’t know, man. Her face is very red, and her sighs are heavier than usual. Maybe she’s trying to keep up a strong appearance?

“Do you have a fever? Did you go to the hospital?”

“I got told that it’s just a summer cold. It’s 37 degrees right now, and I got some medicine for the cold. The doctor said that as long as I stayed put, then I’d be back to normal in no time, okay?”

“That’s good to know. Anyways, don’t worry about me, just take a nap.”

“How can I do that when you could tease me any time by being here?” she says in a cheerful tone.

“No worries, I won’t do any of that.”

“Tch, really...?” she mutters to herself right after.

Maybe she’s trying to make things more cheerful, but honestly I wouldn’t try to tease her in her current state.

On a side note, she’s been running her fingers over her hair for a while now. Clearly she’s bothered by it being that way while I’m here.

“Look, you’re feeling ill. There’s no way you could get cleaned up like you usually do. I really don’t mind, so don’t worry about it, okay?”

She sighs again, “You can’t understand how I feel, Senpai. My boyfriend just came over and he’s seeing me in the worst state possible. How can I not feel nervous right now?”

I know we’re faking a relationship, but I get why she feels like she doesn’t want to “expose” herself to anyone, not even a close friend.

“Like I said, it’s fine. Besides, you may not look like you usually do, but this kind of appearance is cute in its own way.”

She blushes and murmurs “Senpai...” followed by “Are you trying to imply that all the effort I put into my hair and makeup is just futile, and you don’t care at all how I look?” she says in a somewhat annoyed tone.

“Uhh, I wasn’t trying to imply that...”

“Then, what exactly were you trying to say?!”

As I look closer at her, I understand what she means. Her makeup makes her look more mature, but honestly she looks fine as she is right now as well. Her skin is beautiful, her lips are really cute, and overall I really think she looks fine at the moment. She’s definitely a good-looking girl.

“O-Okay, I get it, Senpai, just shut up for a sec, okay?” she says while blushing.

“...Wait, did I just say that out loud?”

She nods very quickly while not looking at me, “Were you not aware?” she asks.

“Uhh, would you believe me if I said no...?”

She looks at me again, “You really do love me, don’t you, Senpai?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I simply stated what I believe are facts.”

“...Okay, how about your subjective opinion, then?” she asks while staring at me.

I should be honest with her.

“You look good with makeup, and you look good now. Without makeup you look more... innocent. It’s cute,” I say, embarrassed.

She buries her face in her pillow immediately after.

“Err, Touka? Are you feeling alright?”

“It’s all your fault, Senpai...”

Wait, is she upset? Did I say something I shouldn’t have?! I...!

“I don’t want you to see me as an innocent, childish girl!” she cries out.

...Okay, so I screwed up.

“I-I’ll keep that in mind. My bad.”

“As long as you get it...”

She lies down on her bed once more.

“Would you like me to do something for you, or...?”

“Well, since you’re asking... how about you tell me everything you like about me? Since you decided to touch on that subject.”

I wish I could ignore this request of hers, but I’d rather not have her get more upset, so here I go.

“I like it whenever you act so innocently, you know? It’s really cute of you, and...”

“Aaaand we’re done! Didn’t I tell you seconds ago to not say that I’m innocent and imply that I’m childish out loud?!”

She then looks at the TV in the room, “Would you like to play a game with me?”

“Wouldn’t it be better for you to stay in bed and take it easy?”

“It’s fine, really. I’m not feeling that bad, and I’m annoyed at being in bed all day, so I was hoping to do something that could keep my mind busy for a while.”

She then heads to the TV and connects what appears to be quite the old console to it. Oh well, she’s eager to do this, so why not?

“Sure, but not too much, okay?”

“Alright, I’m ready! Let’s start!”

The game screen pops up, and she immediately skips the opening sequence.

“Have you ever played this game before, Senpai?”

“Uh, no...”

The game she started is called “Alley Fighter I.” It came out about twenty years ago, and I think most people are acquainted with the series, but I find it difficult for someone our age to have played something like this before.

“I never had any friends to play with,” I continue.

“You can play these things online. Besides, there are other ways you can enjoy a game like this one without the need to interact with others,” she says.

“Just so you know, I never had a console at home,” I continue.

Pops always thought that it was a waste of time, and up until I started going to high school he was quite strict with me, so I never really got the chance to try one of these, even if I wanted to.

“...That’s a bit of a relief, honestly” Touka says with a smile. Why is she happy about something like that? “Because it means that I’ll finally get back at you for beating me so many times back when we went to the arcade!” she follows.

“Don’t go too hard on me,” I plead to her, to which she responds with a grin.

We set up a 1v1 match. I know most of these characters, so I end up choosing Kong King, a gigantic ape, while Touka chooses Moozilla, a very big green monster.

The game works like most fighting games: we need to get each other’s life total to zero three times in order to win. I try to move the joystick and press some buttons to get familiar with the controls, but Touka rushes to where I am immediately after the game starts. I try to fight back, but she makes short work of my character and knocks it out three times before I have time to say anything.

“Hahaha! You’re such a scrub, Senpai!” Touka taunts me, clearly enjoying herself, after winning.

“It’s boring if you simply stomp me without at least telling me how this works.”

“Okay, my bad. I’ll teach you now,” she says right after, seemingly sorry and

realizing what she just did.

We select the same characters and enter the game. Touka tells me the basics, but even while knowing those, the match ends with me not being able to land a single hit on her character. She's pretty good at this. I know I suck, but still.

"You're pretty good at the game."

"I used to play with my brother and Hasaki-senpai a lot when I was in elementary school. I've played with friends when I was in middle school sometimes, but my skill level isn't that high. I guess I can beat people who aren't good at the game, but I tried playing online sometimes, and if a player is skilled, they always stomp me," she explains while puffing her chest—good to know she's enjoying beating my ass over and over in any case.

Regardless, it appears that she's not as good as I thought, I'm simply worse than I'd expected.

"Would it be okay if I watched a video showcasing some gameplay?"

"Sure, go ahead," she replies.

I open Youtoob and look for a video of someone playing my character. I check it out for a while, and quickly realize that the moves this guy is pulling off are way different than what I had done.

"Wow, that looks nothing like what I was doing," I say, to which Touka follows with "I'd like to know how that is done, not gonna lie," she says.

I agree with her on that one. I'd definitely like to know.

"Now that I have an idea of how skilled players play, let's have another match."

I won't be able to mimic those moves immediately, but at the very least I'll have a better chance than before. Or so I hope, at least...

"I don't think watching a video is going to suddenly make you better, but whatever works for you!" she says with a grin on her face.

I know she's right, but I gotta try. Otherwise, what's the point?

Anyways, we choose the same characters and go at it. I lose again, but this

time I manage to actually land some hits on her, unlike before. I actually knocked her down once, believe it or not.

“Tch, why are you getting so good at this?” she says with a smile on her face.

“I think I’ve more or less figured it out.”

We decided to play yet another round. This time she gets knocked down twice, but manages to beat me again.

“You’re getting too good too fast, Senpai,” she says while sweating a little.

“I can’t wait to win the next one,” I say, to which Touka twitches and looks at me immediately after.

“How about this? Whoever loses can ask the other to do anything for them, no matter what.”

“Um, how far are we talking about here? Do you mean literally anything?”

I don’t know what I’d ask of her if I won, and honestly it’d be somewhat of a pain if she asked me to do something uncomfortable, or who knows.

“...Okay, maybe not anything. It’ll have to be something reasonable... something the other doesn’t consider off-putting, okay? How about... I show you a photo album of mine from when I was a kid if you win?”

...I assume that’s what she wants me to ask of her?

“Okay What if you win, then? Would it be an album of mine, or...?”

“Oh, mine is a secret, but do look forward to it. If you win, that is.”

...I can already imagine it’s going to be something I’m not going to like very much.

“Are you sure about this? I’ve been knocking you out more the more games we play. This might be your undoing.”

She simply grins and puffs her chest once more, “Do you truly think I’ve been giving it my all this entire time?” she replies.

Right after saying that, she chooses some pink ball called Mirby, “This is my main,” she says.

I see. She forced this situation so she could reveal her trump card, which meant securing a win. She made it impossible for me to say no to her proposition as well, which means that this is all or nothing. I'm definitely gonna make her work for that win, though.

I don't give this too much thought and choose the ape once more, and... I won the match without breaking a sweat. She didn't knock me out even a single time, but I'm pretty sure that this is because her pink ball was gigantic, and easier for me to hit than the character she was using before.

"...It's been so long since I used Mirby that I forgot all of its moves," she says while hanging her head in shame.

Your mistake was holding back, Touka. It appears that the tables have been turned on you.

She sighs, "Well, a loss is a loss. So, Yuuji-enpai, what kind of request do you have for me? Are you still interested in seeing my graduation album?" she says, blushing a little.

"I have something else in mind," I say as I look her straight in the eyes.

"Wha-What's wrong, Senpai...?" she asked, clearly taken aback. Her cheeks are now flushed, and she's breathing somewhat heavily.

She looks away for a bit, but shortly after meets my gaze, and closes her eyes right then. That's when I touch her, feeling the warmth of her skin, which is way more than I imagined it to be.

"Yu-Yuuji... senpai...?" she manages to utter.

I had placed my hand on her forehead, but quickly after I moved it away. She's looking at me with a serious face, and it appears that she's lost all energy to even smile like she was doing before.

"Your face is all red. Are you sure your fever hasn't gotten worse?" I ask her, to which she shakes her head.

"Oh, that was what you were going for," she says, clearly feeling down. "I'm fine, okay..." she follows while sighing.

"...It's not a big deal, really," I said to Touka, who let out a sigh.

“Let me check your temperature anyways, please.”

She doesn't seem very happy, but eventually she caves in and lets me do it.

I use the electronic thermometer, which after a loud beep, displays the number 37.5 on its screen.

“...It went up just a little,” Touka says.

“Looks like we're done with this for today, then.”

If we keep playing, she might get worse, so it's better for us to stop here.

“Sorry. I was so engrossed with the game and didn't realize you weren't feeling very well.”

Maybe that's the reason she lost as well. She's not in top form, so that could easily affect her gameplay. She might claim that she's fine, but that's just her way of trying to prevent me from worrying about her.

“It's fine, Senpai. I had fun too,” she says while returning to bed.

I cover her with the blanket, “About the reward for you losing, I think I know what it's gonna be, by the way.”

“What's it gonna be?” she asks with puppy eyes, anxiously waiting for me to answer.

“I want you to stay in bed and get better as soon as you can for the rest of the day,” I say.

“...I was gonna do that without having you tell me! Isn't there anything else you'd like to ask of me?!” she says while forcing a smile, trying not to shout.

“Hm, then how about we go somewhere together, just you and I, whenever you feel better?”

It'll be the best way to make up for what I did by not inviting her to that beach trip. Besides, it's a good excuse to keep myself out of my room for the rest of the summer.

Upon hearing my proposition, she hides her face under the blanket.

“I... I was also planning to invite you to have a date with me if I happened to win... I'll be looking forward to that, okay?” she says while peeking half of her

face out of the bed.

“I’ll be too, so get better soon, got it?”

“Got it,” she whispers in return.

It doesn’t take too long for her to fall asleep after our conversation, and I stay in her room while waiting for Ike to return.

Chapter Six

Silence Is My Only Answer

It's the day after I visited Touka. I'm in my room enjoying the air conditioning as I exchange some texts with her over the phone. I've been telling her to take it easy so she can get better soon, and in response, she, well...

"I know you're just dying to have me recover, aren't you, Senpai? You just can't wait to have that date with me! Don't you think you should try not to be so eager with your feelings for me? Hmm? Hmmm?!"

I decide to simply not respond to her teasing, and instead focus on my own business.

I wait for a while, and my phone suddenly starts vibrating again. For a moment I thought it'd be Touka demanding an answer from me, but it's actually Kana, so I quickly check what she needs.

"You free tmrrw? I'd like to see a movie with you."

Right... I remember she mentioned something of the sort when we were at the beach. I told her that I'd like everyone to tag along, and honestly, even though I'm not in a real relationship with Touka, I feel kind of bad leaving her out of this plan, especially since she's ill.

I promised Touka that I'd spend more time with her, but at the same time, Kana is also a good friend of mine, and I'd rather not leave her hanging either.

After thinking about it for a while, my eyes drift to a nearby calendar I have, and I notice that tomorrow is...

"Sure, fine by me," I end up answering.

Kana doesn't take long to answer, "Yay! Right, I want this to be just the two of us, so no inviting Touka-chan or the others, got it?!"

"No problem."

"I sure hope so..."

She gives me a time of the day and a place to meet, and once I tell her that I'll be there tomorrow, I turn my phone off and lie on my bed, reminiscing about those summers I spent together with Natsuo.



It's the next day, and I'm standing near the closest train station to the movie theater. It's the same place where Touka and I had our first date.

I got here a bit early, so Kana isn't here just yet. I open my phone and decide to browse some news sites to read some articles so I can pass the time while I wait for her, when suddenly, my field of vision is completely obstructed.

"Guess who?" a girly voice calls from behind me.

Considering that I'm waiting for Kana, it can only be her. Only her and Touka would do something like this anyway.

"Kana, right?" I quickly answer as I grab her hands and turn around.

And there she is. She's blushing for some reason, looking at me clearly surprised.

"Ye-Yeah, you got it..."

"Why are you so surprised? You can't seriously think I wouldn't guess that much."

"Well, err... I..." she says while fidgeting and looking away.

For a moment I am confused as to why she's blushing so much, but quickly I realize that I'm holding her hands. That's the reason why she's acting like this.

"Yo-You held my hands all of a sudden, so I couldn't help myself..."

I apologize and try to let go of her hand, but she instead uses hers to hold mine before I can even move them.

"Can we just... hold hands like this while we're out for the day?" she asks with a beaming smile, still blushing.

"Are you sure? It's so hot out here that I feel like I'm going to get my hands sweaty really quickly if we do that," I say with a firm voice, hoping that she doesn't notice how embarrassed I am right now.

“Wait! Does that mean you’d hold my hand if it wasn’t a hot day?!”

“...Okay, let me rephrase, we shouldn’t be doing that.”

“Ugh! Yuuji, you’re so mean!” she shouts right after.

“...Let’s just go watch that movie, okay?” I continue, hoping she’ll just drop it and we can move on.

“...Fine!” she says, clearly upset, as we head towards the inside of the building.



We’re in the theater now. The place is quite crowded. Understandably so, as it’s the middle of summer, and this is a popular spot.

Kana doesn’t wait to seize an opportunity to revisit our previous conversation, “Yuuji-kun, there’s so many people here, don’t you think? Wouldn’t it be better for us to hold hands so we don’t get separated from each other, or get lost?”

“It’s okay. I’ll keep my eye on you at all times so that won’t happen.”

“Wait, what?!” she shouts, immediately placing her hands over her cheeks and blushing right after.

Um, is she okay? Did I say something weird?

“I see you’re being more... proactive today, Yuuki-kun. You’ll watch over me at all times, you say?” she continues.

I don’t know how she just interpreted that, but it’s wrong. Saying anything else would just add more fuel to the fire, though, so I just keep my mouth shut.

“...Anyways, is there something you’d like to watch in particular, or...?”

She nods and points at a certain poster nearby, “I’ve been looking forward to watching this one with you,” she says as I check the poster: it’s a romance movie, based on a very popular novel series.

“I’ve been wanting to watch this together.”

Not gonna lie, I’ve had my eye on this one as well. I’ve already read the novel and the manga adaptations, so the movie is something I was looking forward to watching at some point.

“Nice, I’ve been dying to watch this one as well, so let’s do it,” I say, immediately making Kana look at me in disbelief.

“...Did I say something strange?”

“Huh? Oh, no... I just didn’t think you’d be open to the idea at all...”

Ahhh, I get it. She’s saying this because we’re not exactly dating or anything, and maybe watching a romantic movie with a girl all alone while I have a girlfriend might not be the greatest idea.

“Looks like I could actually make some progress today... or you seem eager to, Yuuki-kun,” she softly murmurs.

I could always recommend another movie, but that would probably upset her, so the die is cast.

We end up getting tickets for that movie, buy a couple drinks, and we then make ourselves comfortable in the actual theater. Fortunately, it seems like there aren’t many people here.

The movie came out some time ago, so most people who wanted to watch it most likely already have done so.

“I’m very excited to watch this one with you, Yuuji-kun,” says Kana, clearly excited while leaning her head on my shoulder, making me notice how good she smells.

...Will I even be able to concentrate on the movie if she does this?

I push her head away, “No physical contact while the movie is playing, okay?”

“Okay...” she says with a giggle, trying to hide her frustration.

The lights of the room are turned off, and the trailers start playing. After a bunch of those and some commercials, the movie finally begins.

This movie mixes sci-fi elements, along with romantic ones in a school setting. It’s pretty cliché, but it’s never wrong to use the classic themes most people use. I personally like straightforward romantic stories like this one, at least.

I already know how things will unfold, but the acting is pretty good, and the movie so far has been immersive.

...Suddenly, I feel like I just placed my hand over Kana's. I try to move it away, but while trying to do so, our hands end up overlapping once more: she's definitely doing this on purpose. Haah, whatever, I can't really do anything about it.

She's just gonna keep trying to make her move, so I might as well ignore it. In fact, if she tries to escalate things further and lean on me. I could end up losing my concentration on the movie, so I'll let her have this win.

In the end. I was right. She didn't try to do anything else apart from that after I let her place her hand over mine.

Eventually we arrive at the final part of the movie. The heroine is leaning over the protagonist, placing her hands on his chest, and as they vow to stay together in the future, I unconsciously squeeze my hand.

"Huh...?!" squirms Kana, bewildered.

I can see Kana is paying attention to the movie as well. I mean, the choices made by the characters in the movie just now are somewhat controversial.

I keep my eyes fixed on the screen for the rest of the movie, ensuring that I wouldn't miss a single moment as the story approached its climax.

I can't wait to ask Kana of her thoughts about the movie once it's over.



The credits are rolling on the screen. I feel a refreshing sense of... loss, but at the same time, I'm satisfied after watching this movie. It was a good one, and I enjoyed it. I'm glad I came here today.

The lights turn on once more, and people start leaving. Others still remain on their seats, crying, moved by what happened in the story, I presume.

I look at Kana, who is next to me. She's teary-eyed, her cheeks flushed.

"That movie was pretty good, right?" I ask her.

She lowers her head and shakes it like her life depends on it.

"Wait, you didn't like it, then...?"

Maybe the choices the protagonist made were too outlandish for her? Or

maybe she's crying because she didn't like the story? Well, whatever it is, it can't be, because she just shook her head once more, followed by, "I can't remember anything about the movie at all, Yuuji-kun... all because of you..."

"Wait, what? Because of me? What did I do?" I ask, confused.

She then raises her head, locking her eyes with mine, and pointing at, well... "It was right at that emotional part, in the ending. You squeezed my hand, Yuuji-kun! I got so nervous that my mind went blank!"

...Now that she mentions it, I'm still squeezing her hand. I knew something wasn't right the moment the finale started, and here I am, gazing at the disaster I just caused.

"Well, whatever the case you know that... that if you ever break up with Touka-chan, I'll always be open to, you know..." she says while squeezing my hand back.

I tried to explain to her that I never intended to squeeze her hand with anything specific in mind, but she refused to listen to anything else I had to say, choosing instead to believe her own delusions over reality.



We leave the movie theater and head to a nearby fast food restaurant. We ordered a couple of drinks and sat at a table facing each other. She's been grinning for a while, and I know why, but I'd still like to hear her thoughts on the movie, as well as telling her mine.

"Thank you for inviting me, by the way, the movie was nice."

"I'm happy you came as well, Yuuji-kun, though I wish I could say the same thing about the movie. You made it impossible for me to remember any of it, unfortunately."

She seems to be pretty proactive today, as she attempts to tangle her legs with mine, to which I try to move mine away, but she tries even harder than before the moment I even attempt to move mine.

I shouldn't have grasped her hand back there at the cinema, so I'm getting my just desserts right now.

I sip some of my cold coffee, “We still have some time. Is there anywhere else you’d like to go?”

“Yeah. I’d like to check out some tennis gear, so can we go to a place nearby?”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Okay! Then let’s go shopping together!” she says, with a playful smile.

While it’s pretty difficult for me to keep my poker face due to the unlimited levels of embarrassment I’m enduring, I simply reply with an “Okay” and follow along. Honestly, seeing her happy like this makes me kind of self-conscious.



We arrived at the place she was talking about. It appears to specialize in tennis gear, as there’s a wide array of rackets and shoes as I look around the place.

“You wanted to check some of the stuff out, right?” I ask Kana, who is in a good mood.

In response, she enthusiastically nods as we stop at the section where the clothing is displayed.

She cheerfully asks, “Can you help me choose some of these?”

“Wouldn’t it be better to choose something you’d like instead of asking me, though?” I ask, to which she clicks her tongue, but shortly after she claps her hands, clearly coming up with some idea to counter what I just said.

“How about I make some choices and you tell me which one suits me best? That way, it’ll make this feel more like an actual date! What do you say?!” she asks, hoping for me to agree on this one.

I can’t really confirm or deny anything here. If I say that it would give this meeting a “date” vibe, then I’d definitely step into muddy waters.

“Okay! I’ll choose some of these, then!” she says quickly after, not waiting for me to answer. “How about this one?!” she asks while holding one set over her body.

Bright colors suit her well, so “Yeah, that would look nice on you for sure,” I tell her.

“Really, now? Okay, then how about this one? Would this one work out, or...?” she asks while holding a more pale-colored set against her body once more.

“Sure, that looks nice.”

“Hehe, then... how about this one?” she says while holding a clearly more... mature-looking clothing set, of darkish color.

“That works, too,” I say.

“I’m so glad to hear that! ...but wait! Don’t tell me that you’re simply being a yes-man right now, Yuuji-kun. Did you really mean all those things you said just now?” she asks with a curious look on her face.

“Nah. You have a great figure, so pretty much anything suits you just fine. It’s the truth.”

She looks away, “The-Then which one of the three I just showed you do you think fits me best?” she asks.

“The first one for sure.”

Kana picked up the apparel from the rack and holds it up in front of me, “This one?”

“Yep, that’s the one,” I confirm to her.

“Um, would you accompany me to the fitting room?” she asks, to which I tell her that I’ll escort her there, at the very least.

She enters the room, but before she moves the curtain to completely block my sight, she asks, “Would you like to sneak a peek while I-?”

But before she continues, I cut her off, “Just get changed already.”

It doesn’t take more than a few minutes for her to get changed and leave the room, now wearing the apparel.

“What do you think?” she asks me, embarrassed.

“I think that looks great on you,” I say, genuinely believing that the colors

compliment her style the best.

“Thanks!” she says with a smile, “I think I’ll pick this one, then!”

“Wouldn’t you rather check out others before picking this one up? It’s not like we’re pressed for time,” I say, to which she grins in response.

“Oh, is someone eager to see me wearing more outfits?” she asks teasingly.

“Not in the way you think,” I answer.

She chuckles right after, followed by entering the changing room once more, and telling me once more that I can sneak a peek whenever I want, which I ignore like before.

“I’ll look around the place while you get changed,” I tell her as I leave the changing room area and check the shop to see what else they have around.

I hear Kana saying something from where she is, but I can’t hear her, so I’ll let it go for now.

I loiter around the shop, picking a bunch of rackets and shoes to see how heavy they are. Surprisingly enough, they’re quite light, making me wonder what materials they’re made for to almost weigh nothing.

I happen to spot a couple of wristbands. They could be useful whenever I go running outside, so as I’m about to check them out, I happen to notice Kana is behind me, holding a basket with the outfit she chose in it.

“I see you’re interested in the wristbands. Want a pair?”

“Well, I don’t particularly use them, but I thought they could be interesting, yeah. Do you wear them whenever you play tennis?”

“Yeah, I wear them. I tend to have a bunch of pairs, and rotate them between matches... oh! This one looks pretty colorful! Very easy to spot from a distance!” she says while picking up a specific pair of them.

“Then get them. No need to hold back,” I say in return.

“Um, I came here to get an outfit exclusively today, so I’ll probably leave those here for today,” she says while placing the wristband set on the shelf once more.

“Is there anything else you want to look at?”

“Nope, I’ll pay for this now,” she says while heading to the store’s counter.

As I look at her for a bit, I then return my attention to the wristbands, and pick the ones she chose.



“Yuuji-kun, thank you so much for today! I had so much fun!” Kana says to me as we wait for our train to arrive on the platform after eating dinner together.

“Yeah, I had a great time too,” I say in return, making her smile.

“I’m so happy you enjoyed today as well! I’ll be sure to wear this outfit whenever you come to see me play, so look forward to that, okay?!” she says while looking at me.

“By the way... today’s your birthday, right?”

“Huh? Ye-Yes, it is. How did you know?!” Kana asks, surprised.

“I knew it. Well, remember when you were Natsuo? You told me your birthday back then, and I remember what day it was, so...”

Natsuo would always return home right before his birthday. I remember because we always joked about how I was never able to give him any presents back then because of that.

“Really, now? Oh God, that’s kind of embarrassing... but I’m so happy to see that you remember as well, you know? I’m surprised, though! That had to be so many years ago! How did you remember?!” she shouts, her eyes sparkling with excitement as she locks her eyes with mine.

I mean, Natsuo was my only friend before I met Ike, so of course I’d remember his birthday.

“Uhhh, somehow I did. Don’t ask,” I say, unable to hide my embarrassment. “Anyways, happy birthday and all of that,” I say while pulling out a small present from my pocket and offering it to her.

“Wait, what?” she gasps, surprised once more. “Can... can I open it?” she asks, embarrassed.

“Go ahead. I think you’ll like it,” I nod, as she opens it right after.

Within it are the wristbands she was looking at in the store before.

“When did you buy these?”

“While you were at the checkout, I bought it at a different counter,” I confessed.

I didn’t want her to see me buy them because it was kind of embarrassing. Fortunately she stayed talking with the cashier for a while, so it gave me time to actually sneak away and buy these without her noticing.

Though I’m not sure if giving it to her now was the greatest idea, but oh well.

“Thank you, Yuuji-kun... I’m really glad you gave these to me.”

It’s not the most expensive thing in the world, but I’m happy to see she likes it.

She holds the wristband with both hands, hiding her mouth behind them, “But you’re such a naughty boy, Yuuji-kun. You don’t respond to my feelings, yet you keep making me fall for you. What are your intentions?” she asks.

...I was simply trying to give her a present for her birthday, but maybe I should’ve thought of the consequences of doing so. I’m an asshole, aren’t I?

Before I can say anything, she covers my mouth with hers, confusing me.

With a gentle and somewhat seductive look in her eyes, she says, “All I’d want to hear from you is that you love me, but if you won’t say that, then you don’t need to say anything right now.”



The look in her eyes and her tone are serious, making my heart skip a beat.

Sorry, Kana. I can't say that out loud. All I can do is stay silent for the remainder of our stay.

Chapter Seven

Another Date?!

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Senpai!”

“I just got here, too, so don’t sweat it.”

It’s been two days since my outing with Kana. Touka has recovered, and we decided to have a date at the mall today. I got here just now, and she happened to spot me, so now she’s walking towards me while waving at me.

“And there it is! What every high school boy says as an excuse to the girl who just got to the meeting spot! I bet you’ve been waiting here for a while now, with bated breath, biting your nails in anticipation to see me!”

“...Do you really want me to tell you the truth?” I say while forcing a smile.

“Seriously? I mean, it’s been forever since the last date we had anyways. I’ve been looking forward to this, haven’t you?”

“Not exactl-”

“So you have been looking forward to it. Hmmm?” she says while looking directly into my eyes, with a smug grin plastered onto her face.

“Okay, maybe just a little, yeah.”

“Yuuji-senpai...” but quickly enough she returns to her smug face, and “Never change, Senpai! Always so easy to tease!”

“Anyways, any reason you decided to meet here, of all places?” I ask, not bothering to give her more ammo against me.

Touka doesn’t seem too concerned with me wanting to change the subject, fortunately enough, “Since we’re going to see the fireworks and all of that, I thought about coming here with you to pick out a nice yukata. One that will have you falling head over heels for me all over again!”

Touka, what the hell do you mean by “again?” Ah well, whatever. Let’s ignore that.

“Of course, you haven’t forgotten your promise. Right, Senpai?”

“Yeah, I haven’t forgotten. So we’re here to buy a yukata for you, yeah?”

“Oh, no. I’ll rent one on the day of the celebration. Today we’re here only so I can figure out what you like so I know what to pick. Just like my swimsuit. Remember?”

I think she did tell me that she would’ve liked to hear my opinion before buying her new swimsuit at some point, but I can’t remember when exactly.

“And now you’re imagining me wearing it, you perv,” she says in a teasing tone.

“You’re in a good mood today, aren’t you?”

“I’m always in a good mood when I’m with you, Senpai.”

“Liar. I know you more than well enough to know that you tend to be an open book. Whenever you’re very happy, you show it, and whenever you’re mad, well...”

Suddenly, I find myself unable to finish that sentence, because Touka is smiling menacingly at me, “Oh, come on, Senpai! I’ve never been mad, you know that!” she says along with a chuckle.

She can say whatever she wants, but when Ike told her the other day that I was there, she was pretty pissed. So yeah, I can tell she’s in a very good mood today.

“Let’s go and see those yukatas,” I say, trying to steer the conversation away once more.

“Yeah! Let’s!”

We start walking, and Touka wraps her arm around mine.

“Touka, aren’t you a little too close? I’m gonna start sweating at this rate.”

“This is what couples do whenever they go on dates, Senpai.”

I’d like to remind her that we’re not an actual couple, but she’ll find some way of twisting my words to make whatever she wants to hear a reality.

“Can’t we hold hands and leave it at that?” I ask her.

“Oh?” she says, a grin on her face once more.

“I think linking arms would give us a more romantic vibe, but I wouldn’t mind holding hands with you as well, since you’re such a shy boy, after all. Hehe, you’re sooo cute, you know that?”

“...Yeah, I’m just being shy. Sure.”

I then unlink her arms from mine and hold her hand.

“Wo-Wow, you’re going for it, alright...” she says, flushed.

For a moment her reaction makes me think that I’ve done something wrong, but quickly enough I realize that’s not the case and stay as I am.

“I think this has to be the first time you’ve been the first one to hold my hand.”

“...Is it?”

“Yeah!”

I knew this had to be part of some plan she created in her head, but honestly I’m super embarrassed right now and can’t bring myself to come up with a retort.



It doesn’t take long to arrive at a store that specializes in yukata. The moment Touka looks at them, she exclaims, “Whoa! There are so many beautiful yukatas here!” while rushing towards them. She starts picking whichever ones catch her attention, making sure to examine them closely.

“What kind of yukata would you want me to wear, Senpai?” she asks with a smile on her face.

“The one you want to wear the most,” I reply.

“You couldn’t have come up with a more bland answer if you tried, my God...” she murmurs while sighing right after.

Why am I this clueless about communicating with other people? Thinking about this whole situation is making me cringe at myself.

“Wait, give me a moment. I’ll give it some serious thought.”

“Oh! I was actually just looking for some vague ideas, but if you’re willing to even pick out some of them for me, that’d be great!”

I take a while checking some of the yukatas, and normally a guy shouldn’t be staring at the ones made exclusively for women, but Touka fortunately was beside me throughout it all.

After a bit, I finally managed to come up with a decision.

“Okay, Touka, sorry for making you wait. This one would be nice,” I say while handing her the one I chose. It was made out of a navy blue fabric, adorned with a blue and white floral pattern.

“So... why this one?” she asks.

“Since it’ll be hot that day, it’ll be better for you to wear light colors, so you don’t suffer too much while wearing it.”

“Wait, you went with a practical reason for choosing this?!” she shouts, clearly irritated.

What did I say this time? Why me? Why? Tch! I knew there’d be something about this answer she wouldn’t like, but what could it be? Quick, Yuuji! Think of something different!

“Okay, I... I also thought that this pattern and colors would suit you best, to be honest,” I continue while looking away.

Touka gives me a poker face for a couple of seconds, followed by a grin, “Well said, Senpai. Well said,” she simply says while chuckling.

“Okay, then! It’ll have to be this one, if that’s the case!”

“Wait... wait, that’s it? Aren’t you even going to try it on?”

My words make her blush, “Oh, it’s fine! I wanted to wear whatever you would’ve liked to see me wearing! I mean, I get why you’d want to see me in it now, but you’ll have to wait until the festival to see me wearing it. You’d better be a good boy and do everything I say until then, otherwise I won’t show it to you. Got it?”

“Touka, I’m not a dog, please.”

She sticks her tongue out, playfully.

“By the way, Senpai, are you gonna wear a yukata too? I bet a jinbei would also look good on you, now that I think about it.”

“I’d rather not look like some yakuza running around the place, so I probably won’t wear either.”

“You worry too much about that stuff, really! But, I mean, if you don’t wanna wear something, I’m not gonna force you. Can you at least try one on first, and see how it feels?”

“Sure, I can at least try something on...”

Touka quickly hands me a jinbei right after.

“Here you go! Let’s go to the changing rooms!” she says while grabbing my hand and leading the way. She asks a store clerk for permission to use the rooms, and once she gets it, I enter one of them.

I change myself into the jinbei and look at myself in the mirror. Honestly, I feel like I’m an actual yakuza guy from the movies right now. I feel the aura of delinquency all around me. What’s wrong with me? Like, I know this is mostly because I look like I wanna kill someone, but...

I sigh, prepare for the worst, and leave the changing room.

“Oh, you’re done?! Lemme see!”

The moment she sees me, she stays silent for a bit, but quickly enough gives me a surprised look, “I’ll be real with you right now, Senpai, you do look like you’re about to commit a crime anytime, now.”

“I knew it...”

“Maybe I’m seeing things, but it’s like I’m already picturing that funny dragon tattoo on your back, from that character of that videogame... who was he, again?”

“Wait, you can imagine what?!”

“I was kinda kidding, don’t sweat it, Senpai.”

“Kinda?” So she was actually almost serious?

As I start thinking that it should be time for me to take this off and never try it again, Touka takes a picture of me. She checks it right after and giggles. Aaaaah! Do I look that funny while wearing this?!

“Anyways! You look good! Would you like to try wearing that at the festival?”

“No way.”

“Aw man... at the very least I got to see you wearing this once, so I’ll let it go.”

I’d really like to know if she’s joking or not right now...

“Go-Good to know...” I manage to utter, unable to say anything else.



Touka makes her reservation at the place, and we leave shortly after.

“Well then, we’re done with what you wanted to do, but I assume there’s more stuff you’d like us to do for the day?” I ask.

“Sure! Let’s go window shop for a bit! See what’s happening, and all of that!”

“Sounds good.”

I’ve never really done anything like that before, so this sounds as good an idea as any other.

As we’re walking around the area, I happen to spot the public restrooms, which suddenly gives me the urge to go.

“Sorry. Do you mind if I go for a sec?”

“Oh, then I’ll go too.”

We both go in at the same time. Once I’m done washing my hands, I leave and look around to see if she’s done as well, but nah, nowhere to be seen. I sit on a nearby sofa beside the restrooms to wait for her. She doesn’t take long to appear, but for whatever reason she seems to be troubled.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, but... I found a wallet inside,” she says while pulling out a white wallet from her purse and showing it to me.

Yeah, that’s definitely not the one Touka uses, so someone must’ve dropped

it.

“Someone probably lost it there.”

“Most likely. There seems to be cash inside as well.”

“Yeah,” I say as I nod-

“Did you check what’s inside?”

“I haven’t, but maybe the person who owns this has some card inside, so we should probably give it a look, yeah.”

“Actually, we should probably give this to an employee and have them deal with this instead of us,” I suggest.

“Yeah, I’d rather not get in trouble for any reason, so let’s do just that.”

“Let’s go to the info stall and hand it there. They’ll know what to do.”

“Sure, let’s do that,” she says.

We arrived at the stall. The lady attending it gets a little intimidated the moment she sees me, but fortunately Touka saves the day by placing herself between the two of us, calming her down. She hands the woman the wallet, tells her where we found it, and fills out a form with some info she needed, like Touka’s name and all of that.

Just as we’re pretty much done with the procedures and about to leave... “Oh, Touka-san?!”

As we turn around to see who that familiar voice belongs to, we realize it’s Tatsumiya, who happened to be standing in front of the stall right beside us. She’s clearly happy to see Touka.

“Oh, Tatsumiya.”

“Oh... and Tomoki-san...” she says, her smile souring.

“What are you doing here, Otome-chan? This is the lost children stall, so...”

“Could it be that you got lost or something?”

“What an excellent joke, Tomoki-kun. Very funny indeed,” she says along with a chuckle, though it is clear that she wants to murder me right now.

“Um, onee-chan, are these friends of yours?” says the voice of a girl coming from behind Tatsumiya.

I hadn’t noticed this until now, but there’s a little boy and a little girl standing behind her.

“Please, try to not scare them, Tomoki-san,” Tatsumiya says, worried.

“Uhh, my bad.”

Looks like those two are pretty scared of how I look, so I decide to hide my face with both hands, so they don’t have to see it.

“Um, are you trying to be funny or something, Senpai?”

“Can’t you see I’m being dead serious right now?”

“Apologies, Tomoki-san, but would you stop covering your face like that? It’s only making the situation worse, believe me,” Tatsumiya says while bowing to me.

Honestly, I don’t get it. So if I don’t hide my face, the children get scared, but if I hide it, they get scared too? Man, how am I supposed to win here?

“Are those two your little brother and little sister, Otome-chan?”

“...They definitely don’t look like you, if that’s the case.”

“And you’d be correct. They’re not siblings of mine,” she says while stroking their hair, “These two got lost, and they looked worried, not knowing what to do, so I called out to them and decided to guide them here. Now we’re all waiting for mommy, right guys?” she says in a sweet voice while crouching and looking at the two kids in the eyes.

“Why are you staying here with them? Shouldn’t they be fine by themselves now?”

“It’s not like I have anything better to do. Besides, I bet it’s nerve-wracking to be surrounded by adults. I wouldn’t be much different if I were in their shoes.”

It’s kind of cool to see that Tatsumiya isn’t simply this girl that is obsessed with Ike, but also someone who cares for children and helps other people if she sees them having trouble of some kind.

I see one of the kids whispering something to Tatsumiya, making her laugh in response.

“What’s up?” I ask her.

“He’s asking me why you look so angry,” she says clearly amused, as the kids hide behind her back.

“Listen to me, you two. He’s not angry at you, he’s just displeased with today’s society, that’s all.”

“I can always be mad at you, if you want,” I say back, noticing the kids looking at me as they peek behind her back, clearly frightened, then back to Tatsumiya.

This makes me less mad, but at the same time Tatsumiya is grinning, knowing full well what’s going on, so I’m still a little mad at her.

“Guys! Your mom’s here!” says one of the employees peeking her face from the door leading to the room we’re in. The mother pops in shortly after, rushing towards the children. She seems to be in her late twenties.

“Mommy!” both of the children cry as they rush to meet their mother.

“I’m sorry for not keeping my eye on you, but please just behave from now on, okay?” she says while hugging them.

“Okay, mom...”

“We’re sorry.”

“Um, thank you for taking care of them until I got here,” the mother says after that while bowing to us.

Good to see she doesn’t care about how I look, unlike her children who seem to be deathly afraid of me.

“It was mainly this person here who took care of them,” I decided to clarify.

“We just happened to be here when you arrived, yeah,” follows Touka, as she and I both look at Tatsumiya.

“Oh, I see. Well, thank you, in any case,” she says while shaking Tatsumiya’s hand.

“No need to. They were fun to hang out with!”

“Can’t we spend more time with her, mom?”

“Yeah! I wanna be with her more too!”

It’s amazing that Tatsumiya managed to forge a bond with them in such a short amount of time.

“Don’t cause trouble for your mother, both of you,” Tatsumiya suddenly says, in her usual serious tone.

“I come here often, so I’m sure this won’t be the last time we’ll see each other’s faces. If we do, I’ll make sure we can all hang out again. Okay?”

“So you’ll play with us again?”

“Certainly.”

“Nice! It’s a promise!”

After that exchange, the kids and their mother leave.

“It’s amazing to see how much of a liking they took to you in such a short time,” says Touka, impressed.

“I wouldn’t say it like that,” follows Tatsumiya, not wanting to boast.

“What are the two of you going to do after this? It’s a rare occasion, so if you wouldn’t mind, how about we go and have some tea together?”

“Well, we were kind of in the middle of a date, but you are right, this is a rare occasion... is that okay, Senpai?”

It’s rare to see Touka not immediately decline, but I assume she’s been softened by the scene with Tatsumiya looking after the kids.

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

Honestly, I feel the same way.

“That’s good. There’s a family restaurant in the mall, so how about we go there?”

“Sure thing,” I say.

“Fine by me!” Touka follows.

“Should I invite the President as well?” Tatsumiya asks.

“Over my dead body,” Touka immediately answers.

“...I was obviously joking,” she says while placing her phone in her bag once more, saddened. She definitely wasn’t joking, but I won’t comment on that.

“Well then, let’s head to the restaurant, and... huh?”

She still has her hand inside her bag, and quickly enough she starts to lose her composure, as if there’s something missing inside.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, I can’t find my wallet. I might have dropped it somewhere...” she says while still looking for it inside the bag, “I’m sorry. Let’s just... leave this for another day, I guess...”

“What kind of wallet is it?” Touka asks.

“It’s a white, round-shaped wallet. I don’t wanna bother you guys, so don’t go out of your way to look for it.”

Touka and I look at each other.

“I think we found it.”

“We came here to hand it to the employees hoping they could find the owner.”

“Wait, really!?” she exclaims, regaining her cheerfulness.

We call out to one of the staff members and explain the situation, making her show the wallet to Otome, and...

“Oh, it’s my wallet!... Thank goodness!” Tatsumiya shouts, relieved.

The receptionist asks her to check the contents just in case, with a smile on her face, to which Tatsumiya obliges after bowing to us, since I guess that in a way it could mean that she’s making sure we didn’t steal anything from it.

“Don’t worry about it,” both Touka and I said to her in response.

“Thank you. There doesn’t seem to be anything missing in here, so we’re good.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Yep, good to know.”

“Tatsumiya smiles at us, ” Thank you so much, guys! The tea will be my treat in return!”

“Uhh, you don’t need to go that far.”

“It’s not like I played a part in this. If anything, invite Touka. She’s the one who found your wallet, after all.”

After a heated exchange, it seems that Tatsumiya won’t take a no for an answer, so we ultimately agree to her proposition.

“Uhh, but I didn’t really do anything though, just invite Touka, and-”

“Oh, don’t you worry, Tomoki-san, I will take you up on that offer!” she says with a grin on her face.



We arrive at the family restaurant, order some drinks, and sit at a table, where we talk for a bit.

“What were you two up to today?” Tatsumiya asks Touka.

“Checking out some of the yukata for the upcoming festival.”

“Oh, I see. Did you find something you liked?”

“I did. But well, I should probably rephrase that. Senpai liked it, so I chose it,” Touka says with a smug grin.

“...I sure hope you chose one with an appropriate length, and something that wasn’t too indecent,” Tatsumiya answers, glaring at me.

“Trust me, it’s totally fine.”

“Good to know...”

Maybe she’s mad at me because she would’ve liked to be part of the yukata selection process? Otherwise, I really fail to understand why she’s annoyed right now. She’s clearly jealous to some degree, but I’ll simply focus on my iced coffee and ignore her.

“Oh, you’re done with your coffee, Senpai? I can refill it for you, if you want.”

“Sure. Thanks, and sorry for the bother.”

Touka takes my glass and leaves. The moment she does, Tatsumiya immediately looks at me with the coldest gaze you could ever think of, “I know you’re gonna think I’m a mean person, but you didn’t look inside my wallet, did you?”

“No. Was there something missing inside, or what?”

“No, it’s not like that! I simply wanted to confirm just in case, so please don’t worry!” she answers, clearly flustered.

“...Look, even if I saw a picture of Ike inside, it’s not like I’d say anything either way.”

“Yo-Yo-You got it wrong! There’s this rumor going around in school where apparently having a picture of the President in the wallet brings you luck, so I tried doing it to see if it was the case. If I happened to have one, it wouldn’t be because I like him or anything like that!”

God, she looks like a dude trying to justify himself to the cashier for buying condoms.

“So... you actually have a picture of Ike in there?”

The moment I say that, she freezes in place, and having realized what she just said, she once again glares angrily at me, gritting her teeth as well.

“You tricked me, Tomoki-san. How abhorrent of you...”

“You played yourself. Don’t get it twisted,” I say with a sigh.

“Sorry for the wait, Senpai!” says Touka, as she arrives with the refilled drinks.

“Thank you,” I say, as I take the glass from her.

Just as I’m about to sip it, I realized that the straw on the glass is new... but is it really new? Something’s not right.

...Now I get it. Touka was using this one moments ago. I bet the moment I use it, she’d start going on about how I just gave her an indirect kiss. So before disaster ensues, I decide to take the straw away from the glass.

“Aren’t you gonna use the straw, Senpai?”

“Nah, don’t feel like it.”

“I bet you thought that it would be one I previously used,” she says.

I remain silent, and sensing that she pretty much read my thoughts, she continues, “It’s a brand new straw, senpai. Aren’t you being a little narcissistic assuming that I’d go to such lengths for you? Hm?” she says along with her classic smug grin.

...She may be right, but it’s too late for me to turn back now. I’m conscious of the possibility, which is more than enough. All I can do is stay silent to avoid a barrage of teasing.

“Oh, the misery. It’s great to see you suffer the same fate as I, Tomoki-san, believe me,” Tatsumiya says from the other side of the table.

Tch, I don’t like the way she worded it, but she’s right. I got played.



We talked for a bit longer, but Tatsumiya mentioned that she needed to get to her summer cram school classes, so she decided that it was time to leave.

“Thank you so much for today, guys. I don’t know what I would’ve done without my wallet, to be honest,” she says while bowing to us.

“You paid for the drinks, so there’s no need to thank us any more than that!” says Touka with a smile.

Before she leaves, she approaches me and whispers to my ear, “By the way, Tomoki-san, be sure to not mention my wallet’s secret to anyone, got it?”

“Sure,” I answer with a poker face.

Touka, who saw the exchange, doesn’t seem too thrilled about what happened.

“What was that all about?”

“Oh, um...”

Tatsumiya seems hesitant to say anything, so I’ll help her out.

“She just warned me to not do anything dirty to you.”

Touka giggles and then approaches me, “Oh, I’d be totally fine if you did, Senpai...” she says in what I’d call a rather provocative tone.

“Tomoki-san...?” says Tatsumiya, piercing me with her cold gaze.

Shit! I should’ve said something that wouldn’t trigger this situation. Now she’s gonna get mad at me!

...But wait, she’s laughing? What?

“Thank you, Tomoki-san,” she says.

“Well then, I’ll take my leave. You two enjoy yourselves.”

She then leaves, and once she does, Touka decides to break the ice.

“Well then. Now that the pest is gone, how about we enjoy the rest of our date?”

“Good thing you waited for Tatsumiya to be gone to say that.”

“Oh, I just wanted to make a little joke at her expense! Anyways! Let’s get going already!” she says, while holding my hand and leading me outside the restaurant, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Chapter Eight

The Summer Festival

Today's the date of the summer festival. I promised Touka, Ike, and Tatsumiya that we'd spend it together. So here I am. At the train station. The place is crowded right now.

I got here a little early, so I'm currently reading a romance manga. I always have a soft spot for the tomboy girls that do sports, and that archetype doesn't disappoint in this series, either.

As I'm concentrating on reading, I feel someone pulling one of my sleeves from the side. I look to see who it is, and it's Touka. She's wearing the yukata I chose for her the other day, and her usual hair pins, as well as a very good-looking red hairpin. She looks nice right now.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Senpai! Have I kept you waiting?"

"Nah, not too much."

"That's good! Wanna head to the festival venue?" she says, while trying to grab my hand, but before she does, Kana suddenly appears behind her and says, "Touka-chan, we're supposed to go to the festival together with everyone. You can't just sneak away like that, you know?"

Kana is wearing a yukata with bright colors, and another red hairpin similar to the one that Touka has. It suits her as well. Behind her stand Ike and Tatsumiya.

Tatsumiya was the one who proposed the idea of going all together. Touka wasn't in favor of it at first, but eventually she gave up. I also managed to add Ike to the equation, since this was ultimately one of Tatsumiya's plans to hang out with him.

"Good evening," Tatsumiya says, while Ike simply waves his hand our way.

"Are you okay, Senpai? I get why you look so grim. It can't feel good to be constantly harassed by a cow. I'm worried for you, you know?"

“...I told you I invited Kana the other day.”

I thought it would've been mean of us to exclude Kana, which is why Touka and I had a lengthy conversation about this. She had a temper tantrum and she made quite the spectacle of herself, so I am convinced she remembers.

“Oh, did you? I forgot,” Touka answers while giving me a cold gaze.

“Yuuji-kun has definitely been more daring with me recently. Maybe he's finally grown tired of you?” Kana says, with a smile on her face.

“Oh, far from it. If anything, I bet you're simply manipulating him, as per usual. What a cute little attempt,” Touka follows with a forced smile.

Ignoring their usual banter, I tried to suggest moving from here to the festival venue.

“By the way, President, I wanted to ask... is my yukata strange?” asks Tatsumiya.

“Oh, no, it's not strange. It looks really good on you.”

“O-Oh! I-I see...” she says, her face beet red.

Tatsumiya and Ike seem to be going at their own pace, but it is true that she looks good wearing that. She has a smaller chest than Touka and Kana, and yukata are made to fit those physiques better.

“Is something the matter, Tomoki-san?” she suddenly asks, glaring at me.

Does she read minds or something?

“Nah, nothing. Let's just get going.”

“Yeah, let's,” follows Ike while nodding.

While Touka and Kana continue hating each other as per usual, we all head towards the festival venue.



The place is already crowded, even though things haven't started yet. I feel like I need to be very alert right now, because I rarely hang out with groups, and I'm worried I could get lost at any moment.

“...Wait, nevermind. I already got lost.”

I check my phone, and there is a message from Touka, saying that she doesn't see me anymore. Oh man...

“Where the hell r u, Senpai????” the message reads.

I look around me to see if I can spot anymore, but this place is huge, and I'm not even sure where I am right now.

“Sorry, I didn't realize until now. I don't know where I am, so can we meet somewhere I can easily recognize?”

“No wonder. There's so many ppl here that anyone could get lost. Anyways, we're in front of the event booths, so come around here and we'll be waiting.”

Those booths host some performances from comedians and other people belonging to the community. There's supposedly an open spot before them, so that's a good place for them to wait. Besides, they'll want to be entertained while they wait for me, I bet.

“Got it. I'll be there in a bit.”

Touka sends me an angry emoji, and once I turn my phone off I decide to check around me to see how I'm gonna get there in the first place. I look around me, but I have no map, and I'm not even sure where to head towards, when suddenly, I happen to cross paths with someone I know quite well.

“Hey, Makiri-sensei.”

I called out to the beautiful Makiri-sensei.

“Yu-Yuuji-kun... good evening. What a coincidence to meet you here, of all places,” she says while blushing. Something's off with her, but I can't quite put my finger on it.

“Yeah, it definitely is.”

It's been a while since we last saw each other, back when I went on that camping trip with my Dad. Up until then, we'd seen each other quite a bit, so maybe that's why seeing her now feels off.

“I would expect you to be here with Ike-san. Isn't she here?”

“I did come with her and Ike, but I got lost in the crowd, so...”

“I-I see. It’s true, there are just too many people here.”

I don’t know why, but Makiri-sensei looks happy to see that I’m lost. Why? Maybe she’s glad that I didn’t come here by myself?

“I’m supposed to meet them in front of the event booths, but I don’t even know where I am to begin with...”

Makiri-sensei pulls out a pamphlet of the event, “We’re around here, which means that the place you’re looking for is... quite far away from here,” she says while pointing at the map.

Of all the places I could’ve ended up, it had to be the one farthest from the location. It’ll take me about 15 minutes to get there, especially because of the crowd making it difficult for me to move.

“It does seem a bit far. Thank you, at least I know where to go now. By the way, are you here alone, or...?”

I notice her appearance: her yukata design, as well as her long, black hair, match perfectly, making her look absolutely beautiful. There’s no way she isn’t here without someone else to accompany her, or at least that’s what anyone would think, but I’m more than well aware that Makiri-sensei prefers to go to these types of events alone.

“I’m alone. What’s wrong with that?” she asks, clearly annoyed by my question.

“Oh, nothing at all.”

“I’m simply doing some patrols around the place, to see if I happen to spot some of my students doing things they shouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to wear what you usually wear at school, then? That would definitely make you look more imposing.”

She whispers, “I wore it in case... I happened to cross paths with you, okay?” But quickly she changes her story, “I simply wanted you to see me wearing this in the event we saw each other here,” she says with a straight face.

“...Huh?”

She giggles, while I'm over here losing my shit a little after what she said... but wait, aaaah, I get it. She's joking. She's probably wearing it to enjoy the festivities. Good one, Makiri-sensei. You got me.

"You've worked hard so far. You deserve the rest, teach," I say while looking away, unable to look directly in her eyes. Being a teacher sucks either way, you have to work almost 24/7.

"I appreciate your kind words. They make me a happy woman. Anyways, I bet you'd rather be with your friends, so how about we meet them together? I'll accompany you," she says with a smile.

"I already know where the place is, and I'd rather not bother you."

"Trust me, you wouldn't," she says while slumping her shoulders.

I guess being here alone is boring. I'll keep her company as much as I can.

"...Actually, I'd rather not scare the people around me if I go alone, so I'll take you up on the offer."

She smiles, but quickly realizes this and turns her expression into a cold one, "Very well. Leave it to me."

"Thanks."

"But wait..." she suddenly says while stopping in her tracks.

"What's wrong?"

"Imagine if we run into someone who knows us. How would we explain being together?"

"I mean, if it's someone from school, you can simply say that we happened to meet here by chance, which is true, and that you were hanging with me to make sure I wasn't doing anything bad."

"...Very well. Let's assume someone who doesn't know us sees us together, then. What do you believe they'd think of us?"

"...Maybe that a hoodlum is trying to hit it up with a good-looking woman, to the point of harassment?"

She glares at me a little, but quickly laughs it off, "Being called beautiful does

create mixed feelings within me, honestly.”



“Did you come here for the stalls or anything in particular?” Makiri-sensei asks.

“Not really. I’m not the kind of guy that comes to places like these.”

“I-I see...” she follows, and silence ensues, making the whole situation awkward.

“...I used to love candy apples. I always begged my father to buy them for me,” she breaks the ice once more.

“Oh, you like candy apples? Are they good? I’ve never had one before.”

“I can’t even remember their taste. I most likely wanted them because they looked pretty,” she answers.

Though it is quite a coincidence, there happens to be a candy apple stall right beside us.

“Oh, look. They sell candy apples there. Give me a moment, please,” she says.

“Of course.”

She then heads there and buys one of them, bringing it over to me.

“It’s smaller than the ones I remember,” she mutters while looking at it.

It could be that her perception was warped back in the day, or the apples they use got smaller. Either way, I don’t care too much about that in particular.

Brushing her hair aside, she takes a bite of the candy apple.

“How is it?”

“It’s sweet. And... it reminds me of my childhood,” she says. “Here, give it a try,” she continues while offering the apple to me.

“Oh? Are you okay with that?”

“Of course I am. You never had one of these before, right? Go ahead.”

I can’t help but feel guilty and embarrassed. I know it’s stupid, but this is another instance in which I’ll be “kissing” her, if you know what I mean!

“What’s the matter?” she asks, confused as to why I won’t take a bite.

“I-I’ll give it a try, yeah.”

I don’t want to look like some sort of child in front of her, so I’ll keep this all to myself and try the apple.

“It’s quite sweet,” I say. The coating is dry, but the texture of it all is unique, unlike anything I’ve ever tried before.

“I’d say it is sweet, but not exactly the best-tasting thing,” she says, while taking another bite from the apple. “Though I’m glad we could enjoy this together,” she continues.

I’m not sure why she’s blushing again, but I’m happy to see her reliving the memories of her childhood.



Once we finish the apple, we continue heading towards the stalls. Suddenly, though, I feel like we’re being watched. It’s exactly the same feeling I had when Touka and I had our first date and we were harassed by some hoodlums. Whoever it is, they’re either going for me or Sensei. No clue right now, though. Part of me wants to think she’s the one being observed, but I don’t think she could cause others to be wary of her either.

Which means...

“This is gonna sound weird, but has someone confessed to you recently?” I ask her.

“Wha-What? Why would you ask such a thing to me, Yuuji-kun?” she asks, clearly agitated.

I might be right. This must be the case, judging from her reaction. Whoever this lurker is, he’s tailing Sensei because she rejected him, and he can’t stand the whole situation. So hoping to get a second chance, he’s stalking her? ... Yeah, that has to be it.

“I just can’t leave things as they are,” I tell her, meaning that I should start looking for this person so we both stop feeling uncomfortable.

“A-Are you trying to imply that you’re jealous right now?” she asks, her face

beet red.

What is she on about? I was about to ask her what she meant, but she starts speaking before I do, “No one’s confessed to me,” she says.

“...Wait, really?”

“I-Indeed... are you... relieved?” she asks, looking me in the eyes.

“Okay, then it must be something else.”

“What do you mean?”

If it’s not someone who is tailing her, then there has to be another reason for this person to be stalking her. I mean, it could be someone I beat the shit out of some years ago and he’s looking to get some revenge on me whenever I have my guard down, which... wouldn’t be good either.

“Yeah, I might be the one being targeted...”

“Wa-Wait a second, are you trying to imply that I’m somehow ‘gunning’ for you right now?!”

“...No?”

I decide to approach her and whisper my explanation in her ear, and that I think we’re being observed, but the moment I do she squirms and takes a few steps away, her face red as a tomato.

“Sorry, I need to tell you something,” I tell her so she can calm down.

“O-Okay...” she says while closing her eyes, as if she was readying herself to hear me out.

I approach her once more and whisper into her ear... “Makiri-sensei...”

“Ye-Yes...?”

“There’s been someone who has been tailing us for a while. Do you have any clue as to who it might be?”

“...Wait, what?”

She looks like she doesn’t believe me right now. I get it. Normally, no one would be tailing us in the middle of a crowd, but...

“Ssshhhh, calm down.”

“...I am calm,” she says with a smile. I can tell that smile is just a façade, though. Behind it, I can feel a terrifying presence, something that scares me. Quickly enough, she realizes that this isn’t the time to hate me, though.

“So that’s why you asked me that question before. It makes sense...” she says in her analytical tone. “By the way, had this been ten years ago, I would’ve definitely slapped you as punishment for what you did.”

“Do what?” I ask, surprised.

“Being deliberately vague with your wording.”

“Uhh, sorry about that.”

She sighs in response, “Oh well, I simply didn’t understand the intent behind your question, that’s all. Anyways, how about you, Yuuji-kun? Have any other girls besides Hasaki-san confessed to you as of late?”

I suppose she wants to make some conversation to avoid feeling uncomfortable after realizing we’re being watched.

“Nah, no one apart from her so far.”

“Ri-Right, of course,” she continues.

“I thought that if this person is not targeting you, but me, it could be someone I fought with in the past,” I told her.

“There’s no way one would hold a grudge for so long.”

“I honestly have no idea either, but I can’t completely dismiss the possibility. Whoever it is, they’re still keeping their distance, observing us. Anyway, if this person has any business with me, I’ll go talk to whoever it is.”

I wouldn’t mind having Sensei go her own way, but they could try to use her against me, and that’s the last thing I’d want her to experience.

“I think you’re already aware of this, but if you happen to be right, avoid a fight at all costs, okay?” she says, now more serious than ever.

“No worries,” I quickly tell her as I turn around. The moment I do, the couple behind us, probably college students, recoil in horror the moment they see my

face.

I happen to see the person behind them getting startled as well. It's a man from what I can tell, so I quickly head towards him, knowing that he's the one who's been following us for a while... Wait, is he...?

"Uhh, Sennouji-san?"

It's Makiri-sensei's dad.

"Why are you here...?" I ask him.

He tries to run away, but the moment I ask the question, he stops, realizing there's no point in doing so anymore.

"It's all a coincidence! Allow me to explain myself!" he exclaims. But before he can say anything else, Makiri-sensei cuts him off, "Leave. Now," she says.

"...Wait, didn't you tell me moments ago to try and avoid conflict?"

"You're more than well aware that his skull is too thick to get our point across," she answers with a curt voice. "Ahem! Anyways, what are you even doing here, father? How long have you been watching us?" she asks while clearing her throat.

"I spotted you both buying the candy apple and eating it together..."

"...Yo-You're the worst," she says while covering her face with both hands.

"It makes sense for you two to take turns eating a candy apple. You're in a relationship, after all. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

Makiri-sensei lowers her head, visibly embarrassed. I know that wasn't her intention, but I don't think I'll be able to convince him otherwise.

"I came here with some friends, and I happened to meet with Makiri-sensei after I got lost. So we decided to stick together for a while," I told him.

"Oh, I see, you rascal. You have a date with my daughter, but you also wanna hang out with your friends, and you're juggling both responsibilities at the same time, i take it?"

Oh man, this isn't what I was looking for. How do I explain this correctly?

"There's no way you two met here by coincidence. That sounds like

something straight out of a romantic movie.”

Aaaaagh! Why does he have to be the best at imagining scenarios that could very well be true?!

“What are you even doing here in the first place!?” Sensei asks, this time louder than before.

“I came here to greet the president of a company I’m working with. We’re sponsoring this event, and I was hoping to say hello and check the festivities as well. Seeing you here was purely coincidental, trust me,” he says.

“Why did you have to spot us at the worst possible time, though...?” she says, embarrassed.

“Do not fret, Chiaki. I do not intend to bother you two any longer. Besides, I already saw you two having a good time together. It was a wonderful sight. Honestly, it made me want to taste one of those apples again. Remember how you used to beg me for them?”

Sensei is staying silent, trembling, and clearly mad.

“Anyways, young man, I’ll see you another day, yes?” says her father as he places his hand on my shoulder.

“Uhh, yes, sure thing,” I say as he leaves.

Makiri-sensei is still very mad, but seeing her like that is kind of cute in a way. Is it wrong of me to think that?



After watching Sennouji-san leave, I try to calm Makiri-sensei, whose face is bright red with anger. We arrive at the designated meeting place with Touka and the others, which is the stage area.

As I look at the stage, I see a relatively unknown comedian performing a skit. Only a few audience members are watching attentively, while most people are eating from the food stalls and chatting with their friends and other family members.

“Hey, Yuuji-senpai! You’re late!” I hear Touka’s voice and look around to see where she is, which is nearby. Ike, Kana, and Tatsumiya are also there, smiling

and waving at me.

“Sorry for making you wait,” I apologize to everyone.

“Wait, what? Makiri-sensei? Why are you with Senpai?” Touka asks, looking at Makiri-sensei, who is next to me.

“I’m patrolling the place, making sure none of my students are causing trouble. I heard that you’re here with Yuuji-kun, so I decided to keep an eye on him until you all reconvened,” Makiri-sensei explains.

“Oh, I see! I thought you were on a date with your boyfriend, since your yukata is so amazing, Sensei! It must be tough to be working on your day off,” Touka says with an innocent smile.

...Makiri-sensei’s face contorts, unable to hide her displeasure at Touka’s words, “N-No worries... it’s only natural for me to keep an eye out to make sure my students don’t get into trouble,” she says, trying as hard as she can not to explode on Touka.

“It’s such a shame that you can’t go on a date with your boyfriend during an event like this. I’ll never become a teacher if it means not being able to have fun like this, even on days off,” says Touka, pouring gasoline on the fire.

Touka, you’re gonna kill Makiri-sensei if you keep going. Stop it. Look at Sensei, she’s literally losing it.

“I’ll continue patrolling the area. As I mentioned before, make sure you don’t get into too much trouble,” Makiri-sensei says while turning around, intending to leave.

As she passes beside me, though, she whispers something into my ear, “Enjoy the festival as much as possible,” she says.

Then she turns around once, smiles, and disappears into the crowd not so long after.

“Yuuji-senpai! You can’t simply disappear like that! You almost gave me a heart attack!” Touka says, directing a somewhat accusatory gaze at me.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize.

She looks at me with a scary expression, “But oh well, with so many people

here, I can't really blame you for what happened. I don't want us to get separated again, though, so..."

She grabs my hand, "This'll do it!" she says, right after as she entwines her fingers with mine.

Though it's night time, I can tell she's blushing quite a bit right now. Wow, I can't believe Touka would go through the embarrassment of doing this just to tease me again. She's a prankster even down to her core.

"...Tha-That's not fair, Touka-chan!" Kana exclaims, as she karate chops our hands.

"I can't believe you'd actually try to get in the way of a couple while they're holding hands and flirting with each other. Gross," says Touka, clearly irritated.

That chop actually hurt, by the way.

"Sorry, Kana," I quickly apologize.

Kana glares at me a little, but then lets out a sigh, "...Fine, I get it. I'll endure it for today," she mutters, sounding a bit disappointed.

...Knowing her feelings towards me, it weighs on my conscience, though I understand I have no right to feel such conflict.

Touka, on the other hand, gazes at me with teary eyes and squeezes my hand tightly,

"Senpai!" she exclaims.

Well played, Touka. Well played.

"Well then, now that we've reunited with Yuuji, how about we look around and check out some stalls?" Ike suggests.

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea. We still have some time before the fireworks, so I'm in," follows Tatsumiya.

Those two have simply been there watching us, not saying a single word until now.

"Let's go, Senpai!" exclaims Touka excitedly, to which I nod in response.



After that, we proceed to explore the festival.

“Senpai, I want that!” Touka points at something.

She points at some strap from one of her weird LIME characters that’s the prize for a shooting game, so I use the gun to knock it down and give it to her.



“Here, Senpai. Open wide!” says Touka, trying to feed me a takoyaki we bought from a food stall moments ago.

“It’s okay, I’ll eat it myself. It’s probably hot as hell anyway,” I decline.



“Whoa, senpai, how the hell did you do that? I’m sorry, but considering it’s your first time, I’m kind of creeped out by the fact you aced it.”

“Oh give me a break.”

I managed to win a shape-cutting game, which was quite difficult, and she’s commenting on my skills.



I’m enjoying my first summer festival with friends, however...

“Kana, you look pale. Are you okay?” Tatsumiya notices, concerned about Kana, who looks sad.

“Uh, yeah. Sorry, Tatsumiya-san. I’m fine,” Kana responds. She’s clearly not fine, though. She appears unsteady on her feet, as if she’s not feeling well.

“Touka, let’s check out that area next!” I suggest, trying to divert everyone’s attention away from Kana.

“Ye-Yeah!” Touka agrees, cheerfully pulling me along to the next stall catching on to what I’m trying to do.



We’ve visited several stalls by now, taking our time.

I’ve been noticing how Kana has been lagging behind everyone.

“Are you really okay?” I ask her.

“Yeah, I’m fine! Just need to use the restroom real quick,” she answers with a smile.

“We’ll wait for you right here,” says Ike, to which I nod.

As I watch her walk away, I realize what I have to do, “I also need to use the restroom,” I say as I try to let go of Touka’s hand, but she doesn’t let me. I look at her, and she doesn’t say anything, simply looking me in the eyes, silently pleading me to not go, but understanding what I’m trying to do. Instead of saying anything, I simply look her in the eyes, hoping she understands.

“...Okay,” she pouts.

I then smile at her and let go of her hand as I chase after Kana.



I call out to Kana, to which she turns around and flashes a faint smile.

“What’s up, Yuuji-kun? Did you want to be alone with me?” she teases.

“Show me your foot,” I say in response.

Kana freezes on the spot, and then... “What?! Wha-what?!” she exclaims in surprise, her face turning bright red.

“What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean, what’s wrong? Wha-What’s wrong with you? Are you maybe... interested in...?”

After swallowing nervously, she looks me in the eyes, and, “Do you... maybe... want to do something... you know, naughty? Is that a fetish of yours?”

...What the hell is she talking about?

“No. You’re not used to wearing geta, aren’t you?” I ask in return, hoping she finally understands what I mean.

She looks at me, clearly with mixed feelings, “You idiot, Yuuji-kun. Dirty, naughty idiot.”

“...I never had such an intention. Look, there’s a bench there where we can sit down,” I say as I walk towards it, but instead of doing that, Kana leans against me, making it impossible for me to walk.

“What’s the matter?”

“...My feet hurt. Can you help me get there?” she asks.

I do what she says and hold her while walking towards the bench.

“I... love you,” she mutters, but I pretend not to hear her, keeping silent as I let her sit on the bench.

“I know you heard me. It hurts me, you know?”

“I did, but you know I can’t tell you what you want to hear. Sorry.”

“I know. That’s why I said it hurts.”

I smile without saying a word, and then place my attention on the wooden sandals she’s wearing, the geta.

“Ah...!” Kana moans the moment I touch them.

“Don’t make strange noises.”

“But... it tickles,” she says while furiously blushing.

“They look swollen, yeah...”

I bet this is the reason she’s been looking so gloomy this whole time.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?”

She nods without saying a word. So I take two band-aids out of my pocket and carefully place them on the parts where the sandal straps rub against her skin.

“Aaand done.”

“...That looks good.”

Good thing I brought these in case Touka or Kana had issues with their sandals. I looked into it before the festival, and I saw that girls tend to get hurt a bit when wearing those for the first time.

“Those are meant for Touka-chan, I take it?”

“Yeah. But Touka is wearing sandals that she’s used to, so I didn’t need these for her.”

Hopefully she tries to understand that I came with this just in case anyone got

hurt, but...

“I think Touka is going through the same, but she’s probably keeping it to herself for your sake, which is one of the reasons I find her so adorable. I forced myself to wear these because I wanted you to look at me and think that I looked cute wearing them, though after all the hassle I’ve caused for you, I think it wasn’t worth it anymore.”

I need to find a way to cheer her up. Seeing her down like this is the last thing I want.

I sit on the bench, “I’m happy to know that someone like you would go out of their way for me. Besides, we’re friends. You’d never bother me with something like this.”

“Yuuji-kun...”

Our eyes meet, and she suddenly places her hand on my hair, ruffling it a little.

“I know you said that to make me like you even more... I appreciated that. Thanks,” she says along with a giggle.

Though that wasn’t exactly my intention, I just kept my mouth shut and nodded instead.

“I may not be able to win against Touka yet. But someday, I’ll definitely make her realize I’m a force to be reckoned with,” she says, while placing her hands on my cheeks and looking me in the eyes.

“I hope you’re ready for what’s coming, Yuuji-kun,” she says in the most confident tone I’ve ever heard her say before.

I can’t help but to be captivated by her gaze. It’s mesmerizing.



Final Chapter

Our Feelings

“I also need to use the restroom,” Yuuji-senpai says, his gaze following Hasaki-senpai’s back. He tries to let go of my hand, but I don’t want him to, so I instinctively tighten my grip.

Yuuji-senpai looks at me with his usual poker face, but his silence says it all. I can’t even imagine how I look right now. I bet he thinks I’m pathetic.

It’s not like I can simply force him to stay. We’re in a fake relationship, after all. What right do I have to prevent him from chasing after her?

“...Okay.”

All I can do is let go of him, and watch as he leaves, powerless to do anything.

“Touka, you’re always like this. If you’re worried, why don’t you just tell him to stay? It’d give you less of a headache, to be honest,” my older brother says, placing his hand on my shoulder, clearly worried.

“Shut up... besides, you also knew she wasn’t acting normal and didn’t say anything either, creep.”

“I can notice and get worried, but I bet Kana would only feel bothered if I told her. You knew how Yuuji would react the moment he noticed. Couldn’t you have said something to Kana as well, to prevent all of this from happening?”

It hurts to admit this, but he has a point. I knew she was in pain quite a while ago, so I should’ve indeed said something. I couldn’t bring myself to do that while Senpai was at my side, though. I kept lying to everyone by feigning ignorance, mainly because I know she loves him.

“Tomoki-san is such a character. How dare he leave his girlfriend alone to chase after another girl? The nerve...” Otome-chan says, sighing at me.

I shake my head, “I’m the one who’s being a character right now,” I mutter to myself.

Otome-chan looks at me puzzled, but I decide to not say anything more, and she stays silent as well. But I am right. I'm the one who's wrong here, not senpai. He's just a very awkward, yet kind guy, and I want all of his feelings and everything about him to be mine and mine alone.

He's the kind of guy that gets treated unfairly by most, but never hesitates to help those in need. That's what made me fall for him.

I want to be his one and only. But here I am, constantly lying to him, finding pathetic excuses to bring him here with me just because I want to, and at the same time having to endure Hasaki-senpai's face throughout the whole event. She looked miserable, to say the least.

But I won't give up on what I want. I will fight to be his one and only. But how can I do that when I'm only lying to him, while Hasaki-senpai has already expressed her affection towards him, making her be more genuine and truthful than I've ever been?

...I bet Senpai would like an honest person more than a liar.



"Sorry for making you guys wait," Yuuji-senpai says as he and Hasaki-senpai return after a few minutes.

...They're holding hands.

"Wow... you're the worst, Tomoki-san. How dare you hold hands with another girl besides your girlfriend. I am thoroughly disappointed in you," Otome-chan says, glaring at senpai angrily.

I am kind of pissed seeing this as well, but at the same time I understand that he's that kind of person. He's simply a kind, thoughtful guy.

"Thi-This is because my legs hurt! Yuuji-kun was just helping me walk by holding my hand."

"...We already know that, okay?" I say, unable to excuse a temper tantrum over this. I can't simply laugh this off like nothing happened, though.

"...If you keep causing misunderstandings like these, Touka-san might lose interest in you," Otome-chan follows.

“I’ll be more careful from now on,” Senpai tells her.

Silence ensues for a bit, but fortunately my brother decides to break the ice, “We still have some time until the fireworks start. How about we start looking for a good spot to watch them?” he suggests.

We all nod in agreement.

Hasaki-senpai glances at me and says, “Thank you, Yuuji-kun. I’m fine now.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard.”

“I won’t. But I’m better now thanks to you, okay? Don’t worry.”

“That’s... good to know,” he says with a smile on his face.

We decided to watch the fireworks in an open square, where there are no stalls, so we can easily watch the whole thing.

Surprisingly, we manage to find a space for all five of us to sit quite easily, perhaps because there’s still plenty of time before the show starts.

We lay out the picnic blanket we brought with us for the occasion and take our seats.

“Phew, good thing we found a nice spot,” says Ike.

“Indeed. Now we can relax and wait for the fireworks to start,” Otome-chan follows.

We talk for a bit while we wait for everything to commence. Though the square eventually starts filling with people, I notice most people gave us a lot of space, mainly because they’re hyper-conscious of Senpai.

“I’m not going to make anyone comfortable if I stay here...” Yuuji-senpai says as he stands up, forcing a smile.

“Yuuji-senpai? What’s wrong?” I say, standing up as well and looking at him as he leaves.

“If my absence can make others feel more comfortable, then so be it. Let’s meet up again whenever the fireworks are done. I’ll text you,” he says. He’s willing to sacrifice his own enjoyment for the sake of people he doesn’t even know!

It's so frustrating to see him like that. He might be a big bear, but deep inside I bet he feels sad. I don't want to leave him alone!

"Someone's not being honest. If you wanted to be alone with me, all you had to do was tell me."

"Huh? That's... not exactly what I meant."

"I don't need you to be embarrassed about something like that right now! Anyways! We'll be watching the fireworks somewhere else, so we'll see you guys later!" I shout while grabbing Senpai's hand, which is shaking a little.

Otome-chan doesn't look particularly pleased after the exchange, but my brother smiles at me.

Hasaki-senpai stands up as well, clearly not enjoying this exchange, and she says with a shaky tone of voice, "...Yeah. See you later. But remember, just because you two are all alone, it doesn't mean you can do weird stuff!"

I bet she wanted to watch these alone with him, but I feel like she's letting me get away with this only because I allowed him to tend to her before.

"We won't, don't worry," Yuuji-senpai says calmly.

Sometimes I feel like he's not attracted to me at all, and it pisses me off, but I'll stay silent for the time being.

We start going somewhere else. Honestly, this reminds me of the fact that he hasn't even complimented me on how I look. He chose this yukata for me, so why hasn't he said anything about it yet?



Yuuji-senpai and I quickly find a new spot. Despite its excellent view, it's not as crowded as before, which I find surprising. There are other couples here, openly displaying affection for each other in... many ways, let's just put it that way.

"You know, Touka, it might be better if we move somewhere else. This place is swarming with couples who are all over each other," Yuuji-senpai suggests.

That's most likely the reason why this place isn't crowded. It's probably a well-known spot for these kinds of things.

“...Why should we? We’re a couple too, so no one’s gonna find it strange for us to be here together, doing stuff...” I say, holding Senpai’s hand.

“Even so...”

We look all around us, and most of the people in sight are kissing each other, hugging each other, those kinds of things.

“...Think about it, nobody will even notice that you’re here. They’re in their own little world, after all,” I say.

“...You might be right,” Senpai says with a forced smile, while nodding.

I steal a glance at him, and looking at him from the side makes me realize that even though he’s clearly not very comfortable right now, he’s kind of cute in a way.

I-I need to ask him now. It’s now or never, I need courage!

“Senpai... do you... have feelings for Hasaki-senpai?” I ask him, making him look at me, a smile on his face.

“I do.”

Hearing his sincerity makes me regret my choices. My heart tightens, and my chest hurts. I don’t know what to say.

“How could I not? I mean, she likes someone like me for who I am, and she’s made it clear that she has feelings for me, so why wouldn’t I want to reciprocate them?” he continues.

Why would he hate himself like that? I bet if more girls took the time to get to know him, he’d have lots of them chasing after him. I mean, haven’t I been boldly showing him my affection recently? Like, come on!

“But... I don’t think what I feel towards her is love, if you know what I mean. That’s why I can’t bring myself to ask her out, or think about us being together,” he says.

Though his feelings might be platonic, or he sees her as just a friend now, that could easily turn into him actually liking her. Besides, if I were a guy and had a girl like Hasaki-senpai chasing after me, it wouldn’t take long for me to fall for her either way. Just look at how cheerful, hard-working, good-looking she is...

and her tits are gigantic, too...

"I... I mean, I'm also scared in a way. I don't know how to express this very well, but yeah."

I can feel it. Beneath that fear of his, he wants to like her. Or at least that's what I'm able to sense to some degree.

"I think..." but before I say anything, I shut up. It is not my place to comment on that matter. I should talk about something else instead.

"Could it be because Hasaki-senpai is actually, you know, stalking you?" I tease him.

"You're so mean, I swear..." he says while laughing, making me smile.

Boom!

Suddenly, we hear the sound of the fireworks, and we look at the night sky.

"Oh, it's starting," Senpai says.

"Looks like it. Time sure flies," I say back to him.

As we stay silent watching the fireworks for a while, I notice the other couples around us doing the same thing as before, and as I do, I look at Senpai and think... I think of myself leaning against him, telling him how much I love him, and him saying it back to me.

I know we're not in an actual relationship, and that this is something probably only I want, but at the very least I can share this moment with him. That alone makes me happy.

"They're beautiful," I say to Yuuji-senpai while gazing at the fireworks.

"Yeah, they are... which reminds me..." Senpai says.

"What is it, Senpai?"

"I forgot to mention this to you, but your yukata looks beautiful on you. Way better than I imagined that day."

"...Huh?"

I can't believe what he just said. I've been caught off guard!

“Uhh, nevermind, pretend I didn’t say anything,” he says while looking away, embarrassed.

I can’t brush this off! Oh God, I feel so hot right now, my face is burning, and I can feel my heart racing! Everything around me vanishes; the fireworks, the people around us, the night sky being illuminated by the fireworks... I feel like I’m in my own world, one where only I and Yuuji-senpai are in.

Just being by Senpai’s side no longer satisfies me.

This relationship may be built on falsehoods.

Our spoken words may be filled with lies.

But what I feel for him is genuine. I can no longer keep it inside!

“I... I love you, Yuuji-senpai,” I finally put into words the emotions that have been overwhelming me as of recent.



For a moment, I feel like he shows shock, but quickly enough he says, “I’m sorry, Touka. I couldn’t hear you over the sound of the fireworks.”

As I realize the fireworks muffled what I said, I manage to catch a glimpse of a beautiful one blooming with the corner of my eyes.

...I get it, okay? He doesn’t feel the same as I feel. I’m not someone who’s grown on him the same way that he’s grown on me. Maybe I only said that because I got too worked up... a mere illusion. I... I shouldn’t expect him to reciprocate my feelings, but... but I feel like I need to try again, at the very least!

“Can... can we hold hands?” I ask him.

“...Sure, that would make us at least look like a couple,” he says.

As I hold his hand, hoping for him to finally realize what I feel towards him, I realize that I’ve been a coward once more. I’m scared. Terribly scared of him saying no and putting an end to whatever relationship we already have.

And as I’m wondering if he’ll ever love me, he squeezes my hand back, making me the happiest girl in the entire world, while at the same time making me feel miserable, despising my own weakness for not being able to be honest with him.

I still remember the very same day I expressed that I love him for the same time, right when that train passed by me, and we got closer that day, but ever since then I feel like I’ve made little to no progress at all.

How long will I be able to cope with what little bits of happiness I get from moments like these? When will I say enough is enough? When will I be able to make him return my feelings, and stop hurting myself?



“Can... can we hold hands?” she says with a gentle voice.

“...Sure, that would make us at least look like a couple,” I reply, reaching out to hold her hand. Her hand, cold compared to the warmth of the night around us, squeezes mine.

I want her to tell me what she said before, when I couldn’t hear her because of the fireworks. But... but I’m scared. I fear that if I pursue it now, our

relationship as it is will end.

It reminds me of that time, when we were beside the train tracks, and she said something that the train passing by muffled, making me unable to hear it. This was one month after we first met. Could this be the very same thing happening all over again?

A whole semester has passed since then, and my life has changed dramatically. I made friends besides Ike, have underclassmen who look up to me, found out that Makiri-sensei is not just a strict teacher at school, and even had a girl express her feelings for me.

I feel like lots of things will continue changing, and here I am, hoping for my relationship with Touka to stay the same as it is. Pathetic as it may sound, that's what I wish for.

"By the way... when is your birthday, Touka?" I asked her while looking up at the fireworks.

She tilts up her head and looks at me, teasingly, "Asking about my birthday out of nowhere...? Did you celebrate Hasaki-senpai's birthday recently, or something?" she guesses.

"I did, actually," I say, making her sigh.

"I see how it is. Leaving me all alone while going out to celebrate the birthday of another girl," she says with a sharp tone.

"She's a friend. Come on, it's fine, right?" I say, to which she replies with silence for a while.

"...Mine's on December 25th. Don't forget, okay?" she suddenly says.

"If it's on Christmas, then I'll definitely never forget it."

"Remember to give me twice the gifts that day. I don't want you merging Christmas and my birthday, understood?"

"It sounds like you're speaking from experience," I say, to which she furiously nods.

"It makes you feel like you've been completely ripped off... anyways, I'll let it go that you celebrated your friend's birthday, but I sure hope you treat me in

kind for that favor,” she says.

“Yeah, I promise I will.”

“I sure hope you do,” Touka says, squeezing my hand even harder than before.

A loud firework explodes in the distance, making Touka and I look at the beautiful night sky, which blends perfectly with the fireworks, as each flickers away and gets diluted by the darkness of the night.

In a way, I feel like our relationship is like those fireworks, you know? Not just fleeting and temporal, but also beautiful in a way I can’t correctly describe.

Which is why I squeeze her hand back, hoping from the bottom of my heart that whatever relationship we have will last forever.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up the fourth volume of “There’s No Way a Side Character Like Me Could Be Popular, Right?! Sekaiichi here. Thanks to our faithful readership, we’ve been able to publish a fourth volume! Woohoo!

In this volume, Yuuji and the gang enjoy their summer vacations by doing things like going to the beach, going to summer festivals, watching fireworks... the usual stuff. I think Haruma had more fun than Yuuji, to be honest. Though I understand that the ending was not exactly the happiest one in this volume, I sure hope you’re looking forward to how everything develops between Yuuji and the rest of the cast.

Now, let’s talk about the manga adaptation! By the time this fourth volume is out in Japan, information about the manga adaptation and the artist in charge will most likely be available. I’ve already had a chance to see some of the rough drafts, and though I was initially worried about how they would adapt the monologues, which make up a significant part of Yuuji’s character, my worries were unfounded. They managed to capture the essential parts while condensing lengthy dialogues, maintaining a good pace, and bringing out the cuteness of the heroines. It was simply amazing!

One thing I’d like to point out is that, in the manga, Yuuji is incredibly intimidating. He’s really scary, but... he’s so cool as well! So, I highly recommend checking out the manga. I would be super happy if you could give it a read!

Speaking of manga, next week marks the final chapter of Chainsaw Man! We can’t miss out on finding out how it will conclude and what the major announcement will be! By the time this fourth volume is out, the series will have already concluded, so please don’t look at me like I’m some weirdo for writing this stuff about volumes coming out in the past. The future is now, old man!

I’m also super happy to receive fan letters regularly! I always make sure to read every single one, and they always make me happy. I will continue to do my best, hoping for your ongoing support! By the way, no one has asked about how

many five-yen coins I've saved, and that's kinda sad in a way, but oh well. Considering how bothersome it would be to count them all, I guess it's all right in the end!

Anyways!

I'm still accepting letters from readers. I'm looking forward to reading some if you wanna write to me, whether it's about light-hearted life or romance advice, your thoughts on the series, your favorite series in Jump+, or even wanting to tell me how you feel like you lost a big opportunity by not investing in crypto earlier, when in reality you'd never do it anyway, please send your letters to the address below.

〒141-0031 Tokyo, Shinagawa-ku, Nishi-Gotanda 7-9-5, SG Terrace 5th floor, Overlap Bunko Editorial Department, "Sekaiichi" or my Manager, aka "I'm not the eldest son in my family, which is why I can't endure pain in my knees or back for very long."

* By the way, I always look forward to the updates of Jump+ series, and personally, I find Tuesdays have many of my favorite works.

Now that I've said what I wanted to say, let's jump to the many thanks I need to give.

To my editor, thank you always for your advice. Initially, I wanted an illustration of Haruma fighting the others with a sword on the beach, but he told me that it was better to have the heroines there than having some male characters having a "sword fight," if you catch my drift. We managed to prevent a disaster, so thank you for that. I hope you keep helping me whenever possible!

To Tom Osabe-sensei, who always creates wonderful illustrations! Every illustration is fantastic, but this time, the cover featuring Touka-chan and Kana-chan in stunning yukata outfits is incredibly cute! While I sometimes adjust the text to match the illustrations, I feel both sad and frustrated at the same time for not being able to properly convey how great these things look, so I apologize for that. Also, I must apologize for my sudden and constant urges to ask Osabe-sensei to draw half-naked male characters! I really wanted an illustration with Haruma fighting on the beach and Yuuji being hugged from behind by Kai, but it

couldn't be this time. Thank you so much for always drawing these lovely illustrations! I hope we can continue working together in the future!

To the sales team, bookstore staff, designers, and proofreaders, thank you as well. Thanks to all of you, we are able to bring wonderful novels into the world! Truly, thank you very much!

Lastly, to all the readers who have picked up this book! Thanks to you, we were able to release the fourth volume, marking the midpoint of the story! Thank you so much! I will continue to do my best so that you can stay with us until the end!

I would also like to express my gratitude in advance for your continued support of Side Character, including the upcoming manga adaptation. Thank you very much!

See you around!

Sekaiichi

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